New Explorations in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Brill's Plato Studies Series

VOLUME 10

The titles published in this series are listed at *brill.com/bpss*

New Explorations in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Belief, Knowledge, Ontology, Reception

Edited by

Diego Zucca

BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zucca, Diego, editor.
Title: New explorations in Plato's Theaetetus : belief, knowledge, ontology, reception / [edited] by Diego Zucca.
Description: Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2022. | Series: Brill's Plato studies series, 2452-2945 ; volume 10 | Includes index. | Summary: "What is knowledge? This fundamental question is treated with unprecedented depth by Plato in his Theaetetus, where it opens the path to many puzzles and issues we are still coping with in our days: what is the nature of perception, belief, justification, truth? Which objects can be properly known? How are we to account for cognitive mistakes? How can the mind be "in touch" with the world? This book provides fresh, rigorous and original explorations of the main themes of the dialogue by well-established scholars who work on Plato and Platonism, especially on Plato's theory of knowledge"—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022012190 (print) | LCCN 2022012191 (ebook) | ISBN 9789004516021 (hardback) | ISBN 9789004516014 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Plato. Theaetetus—Congresses. | Knowledge, Theory of—Congresses. | Ontology—Congresses.
Classification: LCC B386 .N49 2022 (print) | LCC B386 (ebook) | DDC 121—dc23/eng/20220504
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022012190
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022012191

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 2452-2945
ISBN 978-90-04-51602-1 (hardback)
ISBN 978-90-04-51601-4 (e-book)

Contents

SECTION 3
Maieutics, Sophistry, Philosophy

SECTION 4
Images of the Cognitive Soul

SECTION 5
Belief, Knowledge, Ontology

SECTION 6
The Theaetetus *beyond Plato*

Acknowledgements

This book brings together (also) a selection of the papers presented at an international Conference held in Alghero (Sardinia, Italy) in September 2019, dedicated to the various issues and themes of Plato's *Theaetetus*. The conference was organized as part of a research project led by me (Diego Zucca, University of Sassari) on the ancient models of mind and the ontology of the soul-body relation.

I would like to thank the *Regione Sardegna*, who financially supported the project of which this publication is the last outcome. I would also like to thank the *University of Sassari* – in particular: the *Department of Storia, scienze dell'uomo e della formazione* – for its support, as well as the *Department of Architecture* for hosting the conference in its wonderful setting by the sea.

I am very grateful to Dr Roberto Medda and Dr Gabriele Meloni, who played an important role in organizing the conference together with me and in making everything come together so smoothly.

A special thank you to Professor Franco Trabattoni, who fully supported the project of this publication, and to Professor Gabriele Cornelli, who kindly accepted and encouraged it as an Editor of the prestigious Brill's Plato Studies Series.

Finally, my most profound thanks go to the contributors of this book for their valuable work: with the generous contribution of such great scholars, this book may hopefully become a point of reference for future research in the field.

Notes on Contributors

Francesco Aronadio
teaches History of Ancient Philosophy and History of Philosophy at the University of Rome "Tor Vergata". He is the author of numerous articles on ancient philosophy and on the reception of ancient thought in the contemporary age. He edited *Platone. Cratilo*, Rome-Bari 1996, and *Platone. Dialoghi spuri*, Turin 2008. Among his monographs: *Procedure e verità in Platone*, Naples 2002, and *L'aisthesis e le strategie argomentative di Platone nel Teeteto*, Naples 2016.

Beatriz Cecilia Bossi Lopez
is Associate Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Complutensian University of Madrid and a member of the Executive Committee of the International Plato Society. Author of *Saber Gozar, Estudios sobre el placer en Platón* (2008), she has co-edited, with Thomas M. Robinson, *Plato's Sophist Revisited* (De Gruyter, 2013), *Plato's Statesman Revisited* (De Gruyter, 2018) and *Plato's Theaetetus Revisited* (De Gruyter, 2020). After her stay at Princeton University (2015) she has held a visiting appointment at the University of California (Santa Barbara, 2018). She has organized several conferences on Plato's Eleatic dialogues in Spain, and has published widely on Plato and Aristotle.

Aldo Brancacci
is Full Professor of History of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Rome "Tor Vergata". He has published several articles and essays on Plato, in particular on the *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, *Republic*, and *Laws*. He is editor of the following books: *Platon, source des Présocratiques*, Paris 2002 (with M. Dixsaut); *La Repubblica di Platone*, «Giornale critico della filosofia italiana», 93, 2012. He has recently edited the essays on Plato by Guido Calogero: *Eros e dialettica in Platone*, Introduzione e cura di A. Brancacci, Milano 2020. His research interests lie in the history of ancient philosophy, from the Presocratics to the philosophy of the Roman Imperial Age.

Walter Cavini
graduated in philosophy in Florence in 1973 with a thesis on Sextus Empiricus and Gian Francesco Pico della Mirandola, supervisor Prof. Eugenio Garin. He has improved his studies in ancient philosophy in London (University College) and in Oxford (Brasenose College). Since 1987 he has been Associate Professor of history of ancient philosophy, first at the Dept. of Philosophy of

the University of Siena (1987–91), then from 1991/92 until 2017/18 to that of the University of Bologna. He has dealt in particular with ancient and modern philosophical skepticism and the concept of truth in ancient logic and metaphysics, with several publications, in Italian and in English, and by participating in numerous national and international conferences and seminars. He has been a visiting professor at the Universities of Lille and Irvine, and at New College, Oxford.

Sophie Grace Chappell
is Professor of Philosophy at the Open University, UK, Leverhulme Major Research Fellow 2017–2020, Visiting Fellow in the Department of Philosophy, St Andrews 2017–2020, and Erskine Research Fellow, University of Canterbury NZ, Spring 2020. She was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, and Edinburgh University. She was Director of the Scots Philosophical Association, 2003–2006. Since 2000 she has been Reviews Editor of *The Philosophical Quarterly* and Treasurer of the Mind Association. In 2021 she will be a REF sub-panellist for Philosophy. She has held visiting appointments in the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, British Columbia, Stirling, Reykjavik, and Oslo. She has published over a hundred articles on ethics, moral psychology, epistemology, ancient philosophy and philosophy of religion. Her books include *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom* (Macmillan, 1995), *Understanding Human Goods* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), *The Inescapable Self: an Introduction to Philosophy* (Orion, 2005), *Reading Plato's Theaetetus* (Hackett, 2005), *Ethics and Experience* (Acumen, 2009), and *Knowing What to Do: Imagination, Virtue, and Platonism in Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2014). She has also edited or co-edited five collections of essays in ethics, most recently *The Problem of Moral Demandingness* (Routledge 2011), *Intuition, Theory, and Anti-Theory in Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *Ethics Beyond The Limits: Essays on Bernard Williams' Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Routledge, 2019). Her main current research is about epiphanies, immediate and revelatory encounters with value, and their place in our experience and our philosophical ethics. She was a Governor of the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists 2012–2018. She is a member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club (climbing new winter routes up to grade VII, 7), an active poet and translator of the classical Greek dramatists, and an untalented but keen cyclist and pianist. She is the UK's first openly transgender philosophy academic, having transitioned in 2014, and campaigns actively on feminist and transgender issues. She lives with her family in Dundee.

Gail Fine
is Professor Emerita of Philosophy in the Sage School of Philosophy at Cornell University; Senior Research Fellow Emerita at Merton College, Oxford; and a Visiting Professor of Ancient Philosophy in the University of Oxford. She is the author of several books: *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms*; *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays*; *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno's Paradox from Socrates to Sextus*; and *Essays in Ancient Epistemology*, all published by OUP. She is also the author of many articles, and the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* and of *Plato 1 and 2* in the *Oxford Readings in Philosophy* series.

Francesco Fronterotta
studied at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa and EHESS in Paris. He currently teaches the History of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Rome "Sapienza". He is particularly concerned with Pre-Socratic reflection, Plato and the ancient and modern Platonic tradition.

Zina Giannopoulou
is an Associate Professor of Classics and affiliate of European Languages and Studies at the University of California, Irvine. Her research interests include comparative classicisms in the 20th and 21st centuries literature and film, philosophy and fiction, Plato, critical theory, and translation theory. She is currently working on a monograph on literary and filmic receptions of Plato's allegory of the Cave in late 20th century Europe.

Giovanna R. Giardina
is Full Professor in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Catania, where she heads the Master Degree programme in Philosophical Sciences, and Editor of *Symbolon – Collana di Studi e Testi di Filosofia Antica e Medievale*. Her research interests concern mainly Aristotle, Neoplatonic philosophy with special reference to the texts of the Commentators, ancient physics and mathematics. Among her most recent publications: *Fisica del movimento e teoria dell'infinito. Analisi critica di Aristotele, Phys. III*, Sankt Augustin 2012, Academia Verlag; *Platone, Eutidemo 294e2–3*, «Museum Helveticum», 75/2 (2018), pp. 129–137; *Question de mesure et de mesurabilité chez Aristote, Phys*. VI 7, in Ead. (ed.), *To Metron. Sur la notion de Mesure dans la philosophie d'Aristote*, Paris-Bruxelles 2020, Vrin, pp. 101–114.

Emanuele Maffi
took his doctorate with a Ph.D joint program between the University of Turin and the University of Geneva. Now he is a research fellow at the University of L'Aquila within a project on Johannes Philoponus' *De opificio mundi* directed by Angela Longo. His main research area are Plato epistemology and metaphysics and late Neoplatonism of Alexandria. On Plato *Theaetetus* he wrote a monography published in 2014 (*Lo spazio della filosofia. Una lettura del* Teeteto *di Platone*, Loffredo, Napoli) and some articles published in Italian and international reviews.

Maurizio Migliori
was awarded his first-class degree in philosophy in 1967 at the Catholic University in Milan and got a specialization at the same University in 1969. He has worked as a teacher in Secondary Institutes from 1968/69 to 1990/91, then he won a competition for Associate Professor and taught at the University of Macerata, Faculty of Literature and Philosophy, Department of Philosophy and Human Science, from 1/11/1991 to 31/1/2001. He was appointed as a Professor through a competition with DR from 1/2/2001 to 31/10/2015. He has been member of the Executive Committee of the International Plato Society (2001–2007) and Vice-President of the Italian Society of History of Ancient Philosophy (2009–2013). Retired by age limits (1/11/2015), he keeps teaching at the University of Macerata with annual contracts.

Vasilis Politis
was born in Greece, grew up in Denmark, studied in Oxford and Munich, and has been at Trinity College Dublin since 1992. He works on Plato and Aristotle. He has been a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and The Durham Institute of Advanced Studies. He has completed two major research projects. The first project shows that Plato's and Aristotle's philosophical investigations take the form of *aporia*-based enquiries; and that this explains why Plato affords a central place in philosophy to the *ti esti* question. The second project shows that Plato's theory of Forms is a theory of essence, and that Plato's Forms are essences, not things that have an essence. Both projects have issued in monographs (with Cambridge University Press) and many articles, including three in *Phronesis*.

Naly Thaler
is a Senior Lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His main areas of research are Plato's epistemology, psychology and ethics. He has published numerous articles on various aspects of the *Theaetetus*.

Franco Trabattoni
is Full Professor in the History of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Milan: his main field of research is Plato and the Platonic tradition, but his research also focused on other aspects of the Ancient thought, such as the Presocratics and Aristotle, as well as on the relationship between Platonism and Contemporary philosophy. Among his writings: *Scrivere nell'anima. Verità, dialettica e persuasione in Platone*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1994; *Platone*, Carocci, Roma, 2009; *Essays on Plato's Epistemology*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2016; and: Platone, *Teeteto* (ed. by), Einaudi, Torino 2018.

Ugo Zilioli
is Honorary Fellow at Durham University, UK and co-founder of *The Well-Pheal Foundation*. His main publications include: *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism* (Ashgate 2006; reprinted for Routledge 2016; Chinese translation 2012); *The Cyrenaics* (Acumen 2012; reprinted for Routledge 2014). He has also edited: *From the Socratics to the Socratic schools* (Routledge 2015; paperback 2020); *Atomism in Philosophy. From Antiquity to the Present* (Bloomsbury Academic 2020). He is currently working on a book on metaphysical eliminativism for Bloomsbury Academic: *Nothing for us? Persons and objects in ancient, Buddhist and contemporary philosophy*.

Diego Zucca
(Ph.D.: Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2005; Edinburgh University, 2013), is Associate Professor in the History of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Sassari (Italy). He has published monographs and many articles on Aristotle's psychology, physics and ethics. His main interests are and Aristotle's and Plato's philosophy, and the philosophy of mind.

Introduction

Plato's *Theaetetus* is one of the most discussed and controversial dialogues of the *corpus*. The many exegetical and theoretical problems to which it gives rise, the richness and variety of topics and arguments it contains, the theoretical and literary "freshness" with which the issue of knowledge is so variously and subtly discussed, the presence within it of methods, arguments and philosophical insights which appear astonishingly profitable for a modern and contemporary sensibility, the fascinating enigma of an evidently mature dialogue whose closing is aporetic and where the Forms are not mentioned (or maybe they are referred to indirectly, by allusion): these are only some of the many features that account for the extraordinary interest this dialogue – that was also so widely discussed in ancient times – continues to rouse in Platonic scholars as well as in contemporary philosophers working in fields such as epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mind.

The dialogue has notoriously been a harsh battleground for the principal controversy about the purported development of Plato's philosophical work and has been read in radically different ways according to the different approaches taken towards Plato's philosophy as a diachronic whole. On one view, the *Theaetetus* is seen as a masterpiece bearing witness to Plato's late-stage abandonment of the theory of Forms that had been so central in the so-called Middle Period Dialogues; an opposing view sees it is as an ingenious and indirect way for showing – rather than saying – that any epistemological view which does not make substantial appeal to Forms is doomed to failure (hence the aporetic ending, calling to mind the Socrates, unacquainted with Forms, of the Early Dialogues). Of course, between – and even within – these diametrically opposed options there are many other more or less alternative readings of the dialogue, each with its own nuances. While this brief presentation is not the place to dwell on a detailed taxonomy, examples include viewing the *Theaetetus* as a merely polemical dialogue which refutes contemporary views on knowledge, or as a dialectical exercise performed as a kind of "open research", or a path of inquiry only apparently aporetic but in need of completion on the part of the reader, or as a retrospective tribute paid to the master, Socrates, as "midwife" of Platonism.

As the title makes plain, this book offers new explorations of the principal themes and issues of the dialogue, and aims at making available for scholars of Plato and of ancient philosophy in general, as well as for the non-professional reader, an updated perspective on these themes by established scholars whose

recent research projects have focused in depth on Plato and in particular on the *Theaetetus*.

This editorial project comes from afar and originates from an international Conference on Plato's *Theaetetus* held in Alghero (Sardinia, Italy) in September 2019. Certain papers included in the book are by scholars who spoke at the Conference, many others have been submitted by international Plato scholars who kindly agree to participate in this collective project aimed at providing substantial advancements in the research on the *Theaetetus* (and on its *Wirkungsgheschichte*).

The book is divided into six thematic Sections and follows approximately – though not precisely – the order of appearance of the "issues", arguments or themes in the dialogue. The *first Section* focuses on the general meaning and role of the dialogue as well as on some of its general features, rather than on specific topics within it. The *second Section* is dedicated to Plato's treatment of Protagoras' epistemological relativism and of the Flux Ontology which is taken to support it (the so-called "Secret Doctrine"), both of which are discussed in the first part of the dialogue (dealing with the hypothesis that Knowledge is Perception). The *third Section* explores the complex relationship between philosophy (and maieutics as a tool for cooperative philosophical inquiry) on the one side, and sophistry on the other side. The *fourth Section* considers the second part of the dialogue (which discusses the hypothesis that Knowledge is True Opinion) and its two contributions offer a deep philosophical understanding of the well-known images through which Socrates (Plato) characterizes the soul as a cognitive subject capable of finding itself in mistaken or false mental states, namely, the so-called *Wax-Block Analogy* and the *Aviary Analogy*, respectively. The *fifth Section* covers both the second part of the dialogue and the third part, which tests the hypothesis that Knowledge is True Opinion with *Logos* (and the so-called "Dream Theory" associated to it). The papers in this Section, respectively: carefully examine the puzzle of false belief according to its epistemological and ontological aspects; inquire as to the multifaceted relation between opinion and knowledge; and provide a detailed account of the "elemental" ontology involved in the so-called "Dream Theory", i.e. in connection with the last major hypothesis critically treated in the *Theaetetus*. The *sixth Section* concerns specific but relevant ways in which the seeds sown by Plato's *Theaetetus* generated later developments in philosophical thought: the selected instances thereof include the Ancient (an analysis of Aristotle's relevant cognitive lexicon – *doxa*, *epistēmē* and their cognates – in comparison with the very same notions in Plato's *Theaetetus*), the Late Ancient (a survey on the Late Neoplatonist readings of the famous "theological" passage contained

in the so-called "Digression"), and the Modern (Berkeley's use of Plato's epistemology, including the insights contained in his *Theaetetus*).

Gail Fine's paper (*Themes in the* Theaetetus) opens the book and brilliantly introduces the main issues of the dialogue. The introductory nature of her paper makes it especially useful for non-experts, but not only. In fact, it is a systematic and critical exploration of the three main answers to the question about what knowledge is: perception (KP), true belief (KTB), or true belief with *logos* (KTBL). First, Fine discusses KP and also assesses its inferential relations with the other two views to which it is associated by Socrates, namely, the Protagorean "Measure-Doctrine" («man is the measure of all things ...»: P) and the putatively Heraclitean "Flux Ontology" («everything is becoming ...»: H). Fine defends an *infallibilist* reading of the Measure Doctrine (each appearance is true *simpliciter*) against a *relativist* reading (each appearance is *true-for-S*, i.e. for the subject who enjoys the appearance). She briefly shows that the first reading explains more clearly how the Heraclitean Flux Ontology could support the Measure Doctrine and, mediately, KP itself. She also argues that the polemical target of the "Self-refutation Argument" (169e–171d: if MD, i.e. if every appearance is true, then the very appearance that MD is false will be also true: see *infra*) is infallibilism rather than relativism. Fine sketchy reconstructs the refutation(s) of H (Flux Ontology), as well as the final refutation of KP through the introduction of the soul as a cognitive central power. This power takes in information *through* the senses, without itself being a sense, insofar as it cognizes and grasps common features (*koina*) such as *being*, which is not perceivable (it is not a "proper object" of any of the five senses) but needs to be grasped in order to get in touch with *truth*, i.e. to genuinely know. She then overviews the aporetic treatment of false belief and the two models of mind that emerge through this treatment (the *Wax-Block* Model and the *Aviary* Model, for both of which see *infra*). The refutation by counterexample of the second major thesis of the dialogue, knowledge as *true belief* (KTB), is then taken into consideration: some judges could well "truly" judge someone as being guilty without having sufficient evidence of their guilt, so without knowledge of it. Therefore, true belief appears to be necessary, but not sufficient, for knowledge. Finally, the third thesis is critically explored, for which knowledge is *true belief with an "account"* (*logos*: KTBL). First, Fine presents the "Dream Theory", and Socrates's criticism of it. According to the Dream Theory, complexes are knowable insofar as they are made up of elements that cannot actually be known but only perceived, and accounts of the complexes are to be given in terms of their elements: but if a complex is a "whole" which is different from the sum of its parts, it is a "new unity" with no parts, so *ex hypothesi* it

cannot be known; instead, if the complex is just the sum of its parts, we would oddly know a sum of parts we do not know. By following the expositional order of the dialogue, Fine then focuses on the accounts of *logos* which could be included in a good definition of knowledge as «true belief with *logos*». After ruling out the option of *logos* as "uttered speech" for obvious reasons, Socrates criticizes the second option of *logos* (of X) as a list of the elements (of X), on the following grounds: it is possible to list the elements of X (e.g. the syllables of a word) without being able to recognize a given element (e.g. a syllable) in *other* complexes (e.g. other words). In Fine's view – a view she develops in detail elsewhere – this criticism would "negatively" suggest that Plato holds an «inter-relation model of knowledge», for which knowing a complex involves not only grasping its elements but also possessing the "holistic" ability to grasp the relations of these elements with other complexes in which the very elements figure or may figure. The third option for the meaning of *logos* within KBTL is: *logos* as knowledge of a *distinctive feature* of the object. It is also rejected by Socrates as involving circularity: how are we to distinguish knowledge *of* such a difference from mere true belief about it? Fine suggests that the circularity could be removed within the inter-relational model of knowledge, through substituting "knowledge of the difference" with «ability to mention the difference and its place into the whole of which it is a part, when asked»: a fascinating proposal, though it goes far beyond what is explicitly stated into the dialogue.

In his paper (*The Structure and Role of the* Theaetetus *in the Platonic Project*), *Maurizio Migliori* addresses the basic question of what place and meaning the *Theaetetus* occupies within Plato's œuvre. He starts by critically assessing the Platonic conception of written (philosophical) communication as it emerges firstly from the *loci cassici* on the matter, such as the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, and highlights Plato's "written game" – a *serious* one, made out of hints, provocations, tricks, and deliberate omissions which shape a "subtext" – as the principal characteristic of the philosopher. On this basis, Migliori considers the sequence of Platonic dialogues as a whole "protrectic" progression from simpler to more complex contents, and also notes that such a sequence roughly coincides with the chronological order established by the most authoritative stylometric researches, i.e. from a group of simple introductory texts for "young" readers (the Early, "Socratic" dialogues), to some more refined and theoretically more engaging dialogues based on Ideas, to the highly technical dialectical dialogues, culminating with the last ones, which include extremely complex "games" and hint at crucial metaphysical and cosmological themes. Now, concerning the *Theaetetus* – which Migliori takes as an introduction to the trilogy, *Sophist-Statesman-Philosopher* (the last of which was never

written) – Plato gives us a reading order by (exceptionally) referring to his own dialogues and in so doing forces us to ask ourselves why the *Theaetetus* has such a "strange place", coming as it does in the middle of a group of "dialectical" dialogues. Though it deals neither with the Ideas nor with the "stability" of the Eleatic Being, it is preceded by the *Parmenides* (that refers to it), and thus by the elderly Parmenides's complex dialectical exercise about certain questions, including the Ideas; and it is followed by two dialogues (*Sophist* and *Statesman*) in which a philosopher from Elea makes dialectical arguments about a conclusion which is left unwritten. The silence which Plato hitherto maintained about Eleatics (an omission which, in itself, carries an eloquent subtext) is broken; at this level of depth and complexity there is need of a Zenonian dialectic reoriented toward a metaphysical perspective that is no longer the one espoused by Parmenides. In the *Sophist* the Elea Stranger continues Socrates' inquiry in the *Theaetetus*, now concerning *philosophy* rather than *epistēmē*, whilst in the *Theaetetus* the discussion of the Eleatic school was referred to only to be deliberately postponed (this also sheds light on the failure of *Theaetetus*' inquiry). The aporetic ending, anyway, is not a negative conclusion: Theaetetus is no longer pregnant, is aware that a radical change of course is needed, and is in the right way to beget better babies; but this is *all* Socrates can do – only a new metaphysics will bring us beyond what his art, which is not the proper dialectical knowledge, can accomplish. By analysing the main readings of the dialogue using Sedley's compatibilist attitude, Migliori finds in the *Theaetetus* what he calls a "*multifocal approach*": the different perspectives through which one can read the work are legitimated by Plato's game of writing, through which he intentionally invites to a multi-layered reading of what he writes and what he omits.

Vasilis Politis (*Is Plato's* Theaetetus *an Exercise in Epistemology? A Granite Epitaph Erected Also on the Strength of the* Parmenides) also focuses on the general meaning of the dialogue, especially in the light of some passages of the *Parmenides*. His highly provocative and brilliantly argued thesis is that, contrary to a widespread hermeneutic prejudice weighing down the research of the last half century (especially the Anglo-Saxon interpretive tradition), the dialogue does *not* address an *epistemological* question, at least if we take epistemology to be a subject distinct from metaphysics: indeed the tradition of scholarly research that he criticizes assumes that the *Theaetetus* does not primarily concern the objects of thought but only how we come to know them and, most importantly, how we come to apply the correlative "concepts" to sensible things. Relying first on a passage from *Parmenides* (132b8–c8) in which it is argued that it is impossible to consider a given "thought" or "content" (*noēma*) without considering its object (*nooumenon*) – an object that must be

a non-empirical *one* – Politis shows that taking *Theaetetus*'s *koina* (184–186) as "concepts", rather than as objects of the intellect (which does not entail that they must be Forms), is a potentially misleading and anachronistic forcing of the words. He shows that, more generally, the "revisionist" view of Plato's work, according to which at some point he would have abandoned the Forms and a metaphysics-based philosophy, is in serious trouble, especially as it relies strongly on the very same *Parmenides*, together with the (chronologically close) *Theaetetus*, as a document demonstrating this alleged turn. According to Politis' reconstruction of a line of argument developed through the course of the *Parmenides*, in this work Plato commits to there being three "ontological" general conditions for thought: the latter must be a) of something *that is*; b) of something *complex and structured* (for example, an item *belonging* to another); but also c) of something that is *one*, with *an essence* which *cannot be perceived through the senses*. Politis argues that it is legitimate to project such theoretical achievements onto the *Theaetetus*' query, such as to challenge the epistemological reading of it. Finally, the question addressed in the *Theaetetus*, "What is *epistēmē*?", is as metaphysical as any other *ti esti* question – in the end, it is about the *nature* of something, and of something whose nature cannot be grasped without also grasping the nature of its proper *relatum*, the known and the knowable reality.

Sophie-Grace Chappell in her paper (*Republics of Conversation: The Normativity of Talk in Plato up to the Theaetetus*) starts from a theoretical suggestion: there is a normative dimension intrinsic to verbal communication – constitutive of talk as such – that transcends the physical/biological/mechanical laws governing war and violence-based conflicts, and is made up from standards according to which one thing counts as "success" and another as "failure"; such "laws" are essentially fragile insofar as, unlike the laws of nature, they can be broken at any time. Pragmatic (but universal) rules of communicative cooperation – such as those theorized by philosophers like Grice and Austin – can be read as containing an *ethical* meaning, as suggested by Apel and Habermas's idea of a *Diskursethik*, or by the philosophies of Recognition developed within the paradigm of the "Critical Theory". Chappell submits that Plato, too – at least in the Early and Middle period – has a similar conception of "conversational normativity", and that the *Theaetetus* is an example of such a fundamental insight. By considering certain passages from *Apology*, *Euthydemus* and the *Theaetetus*, she draws attention to various ethically sensitive norms of conversations suggested by Socrates and generally presupposed to belong to the Socratic *elenchus*. The underlying optimistic idea is that following these norms – that have as much an ethical core as an epistemological meaning, since they allow for a fully deployed rationality through "honest" and just cooperation – would

inevitably produce a *convergence on the truth*. In this regard, Chappell compares and contrasts two somehow specular and chronologically close dialogues, *Euthydemus* and *Meno*: the latter both theorizes (with the idea that true belief must be accompanied or "bound" by a *logos*) and exemplifies (the slave who "learns" a piece of geometry) the convergence on the truth as enabled by satisfaction of the conversational normativity; the former shows *e contrario* how the virtual convergence on truth can be frustrated by a norm-breaking and non-cooperative (eristic) mode of conversation. In any case, there is a sort of parabola in Plato's work diachronically considered: we move from a) the moderate optimism of the "Socratic" dialogues, in which conversation is "negatively convergent" on the outcome that the interlocutors do not know so much about what X is and, in the event, come to learn a lot about what X is not; then b) we reach the much more ambitious idea implicit in mature dialogues such as *Meno, Republic, Symposium, Phaedo*, in which conversation seems to exhibit a "unique rational convergence" as it is able not only to rule out certain results, but also univocally to select the right ones (though Chappell also shows in depth the reciprocal inconsistency between the ways in which the purported rational convergence is conceived of in these four dialogues); however, c) the *Republic* also contains explicit signs of the "crisis" of such an optimistic, ethical and epistemic ideal of a purely norms-driven, unique and necessarily determined content: indeed, the very political model of a thoroughly rational Republic ultimately shows itself to be only possible, a possible dream (506b–507a). Such a loss of confidence in a positive dialectic flowing purely from conversational justice would also characterize our *Theaetetus* and would account for his aporetic outcome much better than some purported about-face embodying a doctrinal change about the existence of the Forms. In the last part of her paper, Chappell makes some theoretical suggestions about how we should treasure Plato's parabola: the failure of an idea of conversational convergence on a purely objective truth does not mean that we should embrace a subjectivist irrationalism, nor sink into management of our conflicts by means of violence. Conversation, innervated with normativity as it is, can still ground civilization and possibly shape many coexisting "conversational republics", in a pluralistic world in which a "truth without convergence" may hopefully guarantee relationships that, if precarious, are rational and not driven exclusively by the need for domination.

Ugo Zilioli's paper (*Protagoras' Secrete Doctrine: Relativism, Indeterminacy, Ineffability*) opens the second Section of the book – concerning Plato's critical assessment of Protagoras' ontological and epistemological relativism in the *Theaetetus* – and analyses in depth the philosophical meaning of the so-called "Secret Doctrine" (SD) which Socrates hypothetically attributes to Protagoras.

Such a doctrine, that represents the ontological side of Protagoras' relativism, is exposed and discussed in a core section of the first part of the dialogue (152a–157c), on which the paper is focused. The Secret Doctrine is supposed to ontologically ground the *homo-mensura* doctrine (or Measure Doctrine), that is in turn equated by Socrates with Theaetetus' First Hypothesis that knowledge is perception. Zilioli first distinguishes two different theses within Socrates' exposition of SD: the view that *nothing is one thing* in itself ("Strong Indeterminacy Thesis"), and the view that no (material) item is attributed a determinate secondary quality ("Mild Indeterminacy Thesis"); besides these two views – that Socrates often conflates through the discussion – also a semantic view is embodied into SD as a necessary consequence, i.e. the idea that you cannot truly *refer to* a determinate item or quality, to the effect that the very linkage between words and names which grounds language comes to be fatally threatened. Finally, a fourth thesis is added to SD: the Flux Doctrine, according to which nothing "is" but everything is always coming-to-be. While the above-mentioned semantic thesis depends on the two metaphysical theses ("Strong" and "Mild" Indeterminacy), these metaphysical indeterminacies depend on the Flux doctrine (Flux → Strong- and Mild Indeterminacy → Semantic thesis). Zilioli successfully highlights the originality and philosophical value of SD and challenges the received view according to which it would be refuted by Socrates-Plato together with the successive (purported) refutation of Protagoras' relativism (which SD was originally supposed to ground) at *Theaet.* 170–171; the Author individuates two different explanations, offered by Socrates, of how SD is meant to support Protagoras' Measure Doctrine – under its epistemological declination, on which *every appearance is true* – a "Stage One" (153d8–154b10) and a (more informative) "Stage Two" (156a3–157c5): at Stage One, a theory of perception is ontologically grounded, according to which any perceived property comes to be only with the very encounter of a perceiver with an "object", so that each perception is true because its content is peculiar to it as it temporarily exists *because* the perception of it comes into existence. Given the Strong Indeterminacy, the view gets even more radical insofar as the very perceiver is not "something in itself" but it is the perceiver it is only at the time of a correlative perception. The Stage Two better spells out the metaphysical status of the material object involved in the perceptual process, i.e. of the "object" of perception, and this new explanation is attributed to "subtler thinkers" who hold that "everything *is* change and there is *nothing* beside change" (*Theaet.* 156a5): perceived property and perception are "twins", offspring-effects of a perceptual power (in the sense organ) and of a worldly causal power respectively; now there is no perceiving subject anymore, nor is there any perceived object but only temporarily and correlatively existing

(active and passive) powers. The radicalization of the Flux doctrine realized by Stage Two "erases" subjects and objects at a time and makes much more cogent the issue of semantic ineffability, as there are not even objects to refer to, i.e. there are no things to be named at all. Zilioli argues that SD is never refuted *as such* by Plato who – according to what after Burnyeat is usually referred to as "Reading A", and against Burnyeat's own view on the matter – would take it as a viable metaphysical and epistemological theory concerning the perceptual world, even if he refutes the view that perceptual episodes could ever count as knowledge.

Diego Zucca (*Plato*, Theaetetus *169e8–171c7: The Self-Refutation Argument and What Protagoras Is Right About*) offers a detailed reconstruction of the so-called Self-Refutation Argument against Protagoras' "Measure Doctrine" (MD), interpreted by the *Theaetetus*' Socrates as an epistemological omnialethism – such that every appearance is true (for the subject who has it) – and supported in turn by a Flux Ontology (the "Secret Doctrine", SD: see *supra*) according to which nothing is stable and everything is becoming (in relation to everything else), and that also fits well with the sensist First Hypothesis of the dialogue for which "Knowledge is Perception" (KP). The reconstruction evaluates the structural relations between KP, MD and SD and takes a stand regarding the basic controversy of this much-debated part of the dialogue: for example, whether the refuted Measure Doctrine is better characterized here as "Infallibilism" or as "Relativism"; whether the argument works or is an *ignoratio elenchi* insofar as it refutes the thesis that all appearances/beliefs are true *simpliciter* rather than the (Protagorean) thesis that all appearances/beliefs are true *for those who have them* (the so-called "qualifiers"); whether the nature of the argument is logical, dialectical, or mainly rhetorical. Of course, all these issues are deeply interwoven, and a unitary reading is proposed according to which the text is one over-arching argument, articulated into a complex and refined sequence of sub-arguments, whose multi-layered inferential relations are carefully made explicit and argued for *vis-à-vis* the main textual problems that make these passages so challenging for the interpreter. The argument works and is not an *ignoratio elenchi*; it involves a logical as well as a dialectical and a rhetorical dimension, but also – so Zucca argues – a phenomenological one, insofar as the reader is ultimately asked to virtually endorse Protagoras' doctrine and consequently to "live" a logico-dialectical conflict "from inside", and hence to be urged to go beyond Protagoras' view by immanent criticism and phenomenologically, so to speak. The interpretation of the whole argument is tendentially "ecumenic", as it shows that the oscillations it seems to involve (e.g. between different purported polemical targets, Infallibilism or Relativism, Global Relativism or "Qualified" relativism, and so on) are a) deliberately suggested to

the reader by Plato himself, and b) attributed by Plato to Protagoras as necessary oscillations that his view is forced to make (in a sort of loop) and which go beyond his original intentions. Moreover, the Self-Refutation Argument is shown to have such a structure that the reader is led to look back, project the new information onto the "old" steps and re-read those steps in a different way, in accordance with a rhetorically elegant – but also dialectically rigorous, and "phenomenologically" efficacious – argumentative strategy.

Zina Giannoupolou's paper – *Socratic Midwifery and Noble Sophistry: An Intertextual Reading* – aims to shed light on *Theaetetus*' characterization of Socrates' Midwifery through a fine-grained, systematic comparison of Midwifery with the so-called "Noble Sophistry" referred to in the *Sophist*. First, the sixth definition of the sophist in the *Sophist* (i.e. the Noble Sophistry) is carefully analysed in its essential distinctive features, as an art of 1) cleansing the soul of those who suffer from "doxosophy" (= who wrongly think they are saying something whereas in fact they are not saying anything); 2) curing them from doxosophy; 3) solving their doxastic conflicts through refutation; and 4) making them angry at themselves but calmer toward others, due to getting free from the false belief that they know what they in fact do not know. As scholars have noticed long since, such a sophistic refutation exhibits a striking similarity with Socratic refutation, so much so that an interpretive tradition straightforwardly identifies the Noble Sophistry with the Early Dialogues-Socratic elenchus, a practice which on its own is essentially involved in the art of Midwifery as is depicted in the *Theaetetus*. Giannoupolou argues that the notion of Noble Sophistry is laden with a deliberate, fundamental ambiguity which can be solved by looking at Midwifery in the *Theaetetus* and by realizing in what respects Midwifery is similar to – and different from Noble Sophistry. Both remove "bad" psychic entities, free the subject from false beliefs and make him "gentler" as well as aware of his own ignorance. Although, the aim of Midwifery is more epistemological, that of the Noble Sophistry is more ethical, and the respective effects of each are thus also different: for example, whilst those people who are cured by the Noble Sophistry typically get angry at *themselves*, those who undergo Socrates' Midwifery often get angry at *Socrates*, though this is not the case of Theaetetus, whose capacity at "giving birth" is quite exceptional. Socrates as a midwife *knows* whether the interlocutor's soul is pregnant and makes him find new positive truths, though the Noble Sophist – who is not said to know whether the interlocutor is sick with "doxosophy" – has a "negative" effect of dissolving doxastic conflicts. Giannoupolou considers some passages in the *Theaetetus* that seem to refer to the Noble Sophistry, in particular the speech of Protagoras *redivivus* who, as a sort of advocate of the Noble Sophistry, accuses Socrates of (not-noble) sophistry, i.e. of producing

merely verbal refutations. The characterization of Socrates' Midwifery sometimes as a sort of Noble Sophistry and sometimes as "mere" sophistry seems to allude to the trial and the respective accusations against Socrates, a fact which, by the way, is perfectly in line with Giannopoulou's reading of the *Theaetetus* as a "Second Apology" of Socrates, which she had previously outlined in her well-known book-length study (2013). Socrates seems to implicitly admit that his Midwifery may well look like Noble Sophistry (and even like ordinary sophistry), if its *method* is isolated from its *aim* – by differentiating between *truths* and falsities – as well as by its divine underpinnings (Midwifery's success needs divine assistance): but it must be ultimately set apart even from Noble Sophistry, despite their undeniable common features.

Beatriz Bossi's paper is entitled *In What Sense Is the Philosopher Leader a "Stranger" in the City? Notes on the "Digression" in* Theaetetus (*172c2–177c5*). Bossi offers a global interpretation of the "Digression" – an "extraordinary" speech by Socrates, significantly placed just at the centre of the *Theaetetus* (172a–177c). Bossi shows that its content is not incidental to the main subject of the dialogue but is central to the issue of the definition of knowledge. In Bossi's view, the characterisation of the philosopher as oriented to the divine dimension and imitating God's wisdom is a way of representing the epistemological search for measurable and objective natures. Knowledge of such natures ultimately coincides with wisdom itself, namely, with true and genuine virtue. The implicit polemical target would be a misleading representation of the Protagorean "sage" as the one who allegedly knows what is "useful" and "beneficial" for the City irrespectively of any objective value. In short, the Digression is a rebuff to the inconsistent version of relativism formerly discussed (166c9–167d5), advocated by Protagoras' "half-followers": there is no way to grasp what is beneficial and useful for a City without a genuine knowledge of objective natures, i.e. without radically transcending the Protagorean (and the "half-Protagorean") conventionalist perspective. Socrates puts himself on the side of the mathematician Theodorus, against those who slavishly spend their lives in the law courts rather than freely inquiring into universal natures and «hitting upon that which is». The ascent to knowledge (a common feature to the *Symposium*, the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*) first of all involves a departure from the "slavish" and conventional approach to life and to the "good" in the City. By the way, this approach was neatly embodied into the worldly and pusillanimous mentality of Socrates' prosecutors. Although, the philosopher's "escape from the City" needs to be carefully interpreted. It is a prior detachment from the evil and the fraudulent imitation of justice which typically permeate the civic environment. This detachment coincides with an ascent to the imitation of the divine paradigm, which make the philosopher become genuinely «just and

pious with wisdom» and this is anything but a way of being indifferent and careless about the City itself. On the contrary, such an achievement is of the greatest relevance from a practical, moral, and even a political point of view. Bossi also provides a fine-grained reading of the above-mentioned formula, in which the «wisdom» does not figure as a third virtue besides justice and piety but – as we also know from other dialogues such as *Protagoras* and *Meno* – as a cognitive but practically relevant condition whose very presence in the subject renders the other virtues «names of the same "gold"». Wisdom is the genuine source of virtue as such; without it, each putative virtue is only exterior and apparent. Through a comparative analysis of the occurrences of the formula «with wisdom» (μετὰ φρονήσεως) in *Protagoras*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Laws* Bossi successfully sheds new light on the speculative role of such a formula as a culminating point of the Digression in the *Theaetetus*. «Becoming like God» through wisdom, as far as it is possible for a human being, means getting as near as possible to the absolute, objective goodness, since God – rather than this or that individual subject or individual City – is the «measure of all things» (cf. *Laws* 716c1–d3), the Intellect of the whole Cosmos, and the principle of each order, limit and measure. Cognition of these three, in fact, is what makes up genuine wisdom, and are thus the genuine virtues as well.

In his paper, *The Ontological Background of the Wax Block Model in Plato's* Theaetetus, *Francesco Aronadio* analyses in depth the famous image of the cognitive soul as a Block of Wax, which represents one of the attempts to conciliate the second big hypothesis of the dialogue, that knowledge is (not perception, but true) opinion. A fundamental challenge involved in this new hypothesis is that of making logical room for falsity, for how can it ever be that a doxastic mental state is false but at the same time directed at something, *about* something? Aronadio takes this image as a material *metaphor* whose basic novelty is a *dynamic* – rather than a static – approach to belief formation. The failure of such a model – the (fallible) recognition of a perceived object through matching it with a previously formed mnestic trace – is generally thought to consist in that it only accounts for mistakes due to a "misalignment" between perception and thought, but cannot account for mistakes which are "purely conceptual" and do not involve perception (this is why the further option of the "Aviary Model" would follow). Aronadio challenges this received view and argues that the model fails for more general and "structural" reasons, depending on an inadequate idea of "mediacy" involved in the model itself, i.e. «a process whose mediated nature is articulated in a sequence of direct relationships» (the direct imprint of the perception on the wax, its direct retention in memory, its direct one-to-one matching with the new incoming perception) and where knowledge and memory are straightforwardly identified. In

particular, the image – though metaphorical – presupposes an atomistic and rudimentarily empiricist view of thought in which dianoetic contents are quasi-corporeal, "paratactically" juxtaposed elements rather than being integrated and interconnected into a unified system. Similarly, the cognitive power of memory is constrained into an "exterior" and mechanically sequential temporality typical of singular sensible events, which "horizontally" follow one another. So, although it is true that the model does not work for conceptual mistakes in thought, this is not its only limit; in fact, its limitations are much more comprehensive and depend on a deeper inadequacy in grasping the holistic nature of our cognitive activity: in particular, any autonomy or "spontaneity" of the soul in synthetizing multiplicity by interacting with perception, as well as in reprocessing the retained inputs, is missing, in favour of the idea of a merely passive reception; such a «friction between the materiality of the metaphor and the immateriality of the metaphorized soul» is then overcome by the introduction of *koina* as objects of a reasoning soul, now posited as the genuine, unified cognitive subject whose synthetic activity also precedes that of memory, rather than just following it. Finally, the Wax Block Model is unable to account for *progress* in knowledge, since it keeps within the limits of a mechanical matching between *singular* experienced tokens, whilst the universal nature of knowledge can only be rooted in a "discrete" shift from tokens to types, this in turn involving the soul's recollection process and an ontology of Forms (aspects which go beyond the *Theaetetus*).

Emanuele Maffi's paper (*The Soul as an Aviary: a Metaphorical and Metaphysical Reading*) focuses on the further *Theaetetus* "step" of cognitive psychology, dealing once again with the puzzle of false belief – the Aviary Model. His fascinating reconstruction suggests a deliberate reference by Plato, in this part of the dialogue (together with the successive refutation of the Second Hypothesis on what knowledge is, i.e. the so-called "Jury's passage") to the doctrine of recollection set out in the *Meno*. It goes without saying that Maffi's view is more unitarian than revisionist about Plato's epistemology, since Plato could not *positively* refer to doctrines he had already abandoned (revisionists like McDowell, on the contrary, suggest a *self-critical* reference to the *Meno*'s recollection). The aviary is first introduced to illustrate the difference between dispositional knowledge (retained in the soul's "cage", which is compared to an aviary) and knowledge in exercise (having caught the right bird from one's own soul-aviary). However, this difference, though fundamental, is not enough to make doxastic mistakes conceivable, provided that Socrates remains committed to a sort of "All or nothing principle" according to which *either* you know (everything about) X *or* you do not know (anything about) X and *tertium non datur* (if you *know* the bird, X, how on earth could you mistake it for another

bird, Y?); thus, you cannot possess knowledge of X but fail to "have" this very knowledge in exercise, unless you do not really know X, i.e. unless you do not know … what you know: the original paradox is still far from being overcome. Taking the Aviary Model as a way of hinting approvingly at the *Meno*'s Recollection, calls for an explanation of why the *Theaetetus*' Socrates states that the soul-Aviary is "empty" when we are children (197e2–3). This explanation is provided by Maffi, who denies that such a Socratic addition has either an anti-innatist or an empiricist meaning, despite appearances to the contrary: the child is "empty" not ontologically but *phenomenologically*, just as is the slave in the *Meno*, who is presented as – and *feels* himself to be – absolutely ignorant in geometry, though his soul contains those universal notions and *a priori* laws which make him (*seem* to) "learn" geometry through the anamnestic experiment. Maffi also points out that elsewhere, for example in the *Phaedo*, the idea that knowledge draws on recollection is compatible with the idea that we know insofar as we possess the Forms in the soul because we have "learned" them (through detaching from the bodily dimension as much as possible): *Phaedo*'s possessed Forms would be *Theaetetus*' possessed birds, *Phaedo*'s soul would be *Theaetetus*' Aviary. But the if "possession" can be of a prenatal kind, and then the "having" could be our coming-to-know or anamnestically "recognize" through our lifetime unconsciously possessed contents, then the "having" should involve a gradual progression – that of the dialectic method (the direct vision of the Forms being possible only in our prenatal, disembodied grasp of them). However, this possibility is blocked by the above-mentioned "all or nothing principle", which is why the Aviary model is doomed to failure: only the doctrine of Recollection would enable us to leave this principle behind and to account for false belief (as well as for learning and gradually coming-to-know), such that Plato's silence on recollection in this passage concerning the Aviary Model would be intentional and philosophically eloquent. In his paper Maffi also provides support for his argument that the Aviary Model – together with the "Jury's passage", the so-called Digression, and also the Third Hypothesis about Knowledge as True Opinion with *Logos* – directly and intentionally recalls the *Meno* and, more generally, the onto-epistemic constellation of the Middle Period dialogues. Socrates' guesswork, in the *Meno*, that an "account of the cause" (*aitias logismos*) may make true belief into knowledge is shown to be false in the third part of the *Theaetetus*, the sub-textual outcome of which – Maffi points out – is that *logos* may put our beliefs in a better and better position in terms of consistency and justification but will never make them into knowledge *stricto sensu*, i.e. into a direct grasp of Forms. This, incidentally, would be the same view as that contained in the *Theaetetus*' "Jury passage" – no reasoning or weighing up of evidence will ever substitute direct

witnessing (read, a noetic insight of Forms), i.e., our human, discursive knowledge will forever remain "second-hand knowledge".

Francesco Fronterotta's contribution (*Two Remarks on False Opinion between Epistemology and Ontology in* Theaetetus *187b–201c*) also focuses on the central issue of false opinion. The author first rejects the "revisionist" – typically analytic – view which sees the dialogue as a witness to Plato's self-criticism and abandonment of the doctrine of Forms: the *Theaetetus*' silence about Forms would be better explained in "Cornfordian" (or "continental") terms as a deliberate omission in order to indirectly show that no consistent definition of knowledge is possible without appealing to Forms. One basis for such an explanation, according to Fronterotta, is to be found in a passage of *Parmenides* (135b–c) which says that without forms «there would remain nothing on which to fix one's thought», a passage which in turn needs to be understood philosophically in light of the «greatest difficulty» about Forms raised some lines earlier, i.e. the hypothesis that Forms and sensible particulars are totally separate. In this case, there would be a science of Forms, and a less valuable, less precise science concerning sensible things, independent of each other just as their respective ontological domains are supposed to be. Now, the *Theaetetus* would critically consider this hypothesis and the idea of a science of sensible things; this is why the First Hypothesis equates knowledge with perception, and why the Second and Third hypotheses also characterize knowledge as a kind of opinion but the contents provided as examples of these hypotheses only concern sensible things. The aporetic outcome would be an answer in the negative to *Parmenides*' hypothesis mentioned above – there cannot be a science of sensible things (conceived of as totally separate from the realm of Forms). The parallel with *Parmenides* is quite precise, as can be seen from two examples: the *Theaetetus*' first "sensist" hypothesis (with its correlative Heraclitean Flux Ontology and Protagorean subjectivism) corresponds to *Parmenides*' «Zeno's *logoi*» (127e–130a), which give rise to contradictions insofar as they only consider the sensible being; likewise, the *Theaetetus*' idea *of koina* existing in the soul roughly corresponds to *Parmenides*' hypothesis (equally deficient) that Forms are *noēmata* into the soul. On the question of the impossibility of false opinion Fronterotta stands out from most scholars who share the "Cornfordian" view on the dialogue: for him, the paradoxical outcome that false opinion is impossible would not be fallacious *as such*, indeed it would even be *necessary* in a world made up of sensible things. After quickly noting the five attempts to account for false opinion (opinion about "that which one does not know", opinion about "that which is not", *allodoxia*, the Wax Block Model, and the Aviary Model: 187b–201c), the Author argues that «in a world inhabited only by sensible things perception of sensible things is either certainly true or does

not occur at all», and that if opinion is perception-based it follows as a matter of course that there is no room for discriminating against an opinion as false (there is no "all-or-nothing" fallacy, nor a prejudicial "visual-perceptual epistemic model": rather, these are legitimate and consistently arguable *consequences* of the very onto-epistemic framework Socrates is criticizing). Moreover, Socrates' marginalization of intermediate states between knowing and ignoring, such as "forgetting" and "learning", is an implicit invitation to go beyond the one-level onto-epistemology of the *Theaetetus* to the two-level approach of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, where the doctrine of recollection binds the soul's knowledge to Forms. Indeed, it is the too narrow ontology of the *Theaetetus* that does not have room for such "transitional" states. Even in the "doxastic" Second and Third Hypotheses, the ultimate criterion of truth for opinions still depends on perception, which provides the (sensible) object of opinion, and perceptions are either "true" in themselves or they are not. Only by supposing a cognitive contact with Forms (which can well be partial and progressive, just as recollection can be) can we make sense of false opinions, as cases in which a subject does not perfectly know those Forms, such that he/she falsely attributes one of them to this or that sensible object (provided by perception as a real "topic" for such attribution).

Franco Trabattoni (*Knowledge, Opinion, and Recollection in the* Theaetetus) does not share the "Cornfordian" view of the dialogue, though he also rejects the "revisionist" view. Instead he considers the *Theaetetus*' epistemological results as shared by Plato, at least to a certain extent. In his paper he challenges the received view on the Second (and Third) Hypothesis, according to which: a) the *doxa* these Hypotheses refer to is the opinion about sensible things, and b) this kind of opinion is essentially *fallible* for Plato so it can never be *epistēmē* (= infallible knowledge), and this is the reason why both hypotheses/definitions are ultimately doomed to failure. Instead, the central insight of the transition from perception to *doxa* is that it involves a transition to *universal, stable* and *non-relative* objects such as the *koina* Socrates introduces, and also a transition from a passive reception by to an *active operation* of the soul (*doxa* would mean, here, *judgement* through reasoning and inference). Trabattoni also considers the five attempts to account for false beliefs and focuses on the last one, i.e. the one grounded on the Aviary Model. This Model apparently allows for an explanation of false opinion through distinguishing potential and actually exercised knowledge, but it only accounts for how a "purely intellectual" mistake could come about, without really accounting for how the corresponding opinion can be formed, because as soon as this "catching" the wrong bird becomes a present belief, the subject would be presently mistaken just about something he/she knows and *because* he/she knows it. Now, Trabattoni

inverts the standard way of reading this passage and interprets its real moral as follows: if not even the "highest" and "purest" mistake (an exclusively intellectual one, such as a wrong mathematical operation) can be accounted for, and the reason why this mistake looks impossible is the assumption that the object (the number) is *known*, we should conclude that knowledge – even knowledge of such abstract objects ("pure" and not contaminated by the interference of perceptual information) – is impossible, it is just not accessible to man. What remains to inquire is *why* the high standards of infallibility for knowledge cannot be satisfied, and what kind of "humbler" knowledge can be reached by human beings: the latter question, Trabattoni argues, is answered by the Third Hypothesis, which defines knowledge as true opinion with *logos*; this definition would positively capture what human knowledge can be on the one hand, but on the other hand it would "fail" *as* a definition of knowledge purporting to meet those absolute standards which have already emerged as unattainable by man. The first question depends on the very standards, i.e. on grasping what knowledge is, and Plato would hint at this in the so-called "Jury passage", where Socrates refutes the Second Hypothesis (knowledge as true opinion, 201a–c): a judge who examined a case of a crime and heard witnesses, would have a true opinion about the crime but no knowledge of it, insofar as he has not directly witnessed the crime; therefore, having a true opinion about something, even when supported by reasoning and rational weighting of available evidence, cannot suffice for having knowledge about it. Such refutation "negatively" entails the assumption that direct "vision" *is* knowledge, and that scholars have not given sufficient weight to this passage since they wrongly fail to read it as a *metaphor*, the sensible nature of the crime being like the sensible sea in the *Phaedo*'s analogy of a second navigation (and, by the way, the *Phaedo*'s *logoi* being the same as the *Theaetetus*' *doxa*). In short, knowledge must be both infallible and universal; perception meets the first criterion (involving the actual presence of its object as directly perceived), but not the second; opinion as judgement we come to through reasoning meets the second criterion but not the first (it is neither direct nor infallible), but it is all we have; its regulative idea, so to speak, to which we must come as close as possible, is that of a direct intellectual "vision" of the universal, a condition we cannot attain and that can only be postulated in the past, as the doctrine of recollection does (and Trabattoni sees relevant allusions to this doctrine in the *Theaetetus*).

With *Naly Thaler*'s contribution (*The* Theaetetus *on Elements and* Epistēmē) we finally come to the Third Hypothesis, i.e. the definition of knowledge as "true opinion with a *logos*" (201c8–d3). In particular, Thaler focuses on the notion of "element" (*stoicheion*) which is at work throughout the discussion in the Third Hypothesis: this hypothesis is associated by Socrates with the so-called "Dream

Theory", by which things are made out of elements in such a way that being able to list the names of each element of a thing amounts to knowing the thing (this is the reading of "*logos*" as "account of the elements"). A puzzle of the Dream Theory is that if knowing X involves listing the constituents (a, b, c, n) of X, and provided that the constituents *ex hypothesi* are simple and have no constituents themselves, *they* cannot be known. Socrates refutes the theory as follows: *either* the complex is an "all", i.e. the mere sum of its parts so that it is identical to those parts, and it is not knowable just as its parts are not; or the complex is something other than its parts (a new "holistic" unit), and it is not knowable either insofar as it has no parts, being in fact a "simple" whole. Later on, Socrates takes letters and syllables as examples – respectively – of *stoicheia* and "wholes" (or "alls") made out of them. When discussing the idea of *logos* as an account of elements through the syllables/letters example (201c8–d3), Socrates points out that beginners typically make certain mistakes, i.e. they apply the right letter to a syllable X but then they wrongly apply the same letter to another syllable Y, or they wrongly apply a different letter to the same syllable X (when it occurs in another word): we would say that such a beginner does not *know* the syllable yet, so we should also say that he/she can have a true *opinion* about X "with an account" (of X's elements), although it is still not *knowledge* of X. Thaler – for whom by these examples Socrates means a misapplication (and thus an absence of knowledge) of individual *letters* rather than of *syllables* (so of basic, simple elements) – argues that this exploration of the (second account of the) Third Hypothesis clarifies the previous refutation of the "Dream Theory" based on the relationship between the parts and the whole (or "alls") through making explicit why one can never know the syllables without knowing the letters (= the "elements"). He critically examines a reading of the Dream Theory's Parts/Whole discussion, to which he refers as the "Underlying Knowledge Model" (the "UKM", as suggested by Fine, Chappell and others), according to which Plato wants us to understand that knowledge of X is not *just* true belief of X with an account of X's elements, but also involves grasping the systematic relations between X' elements (relations which are so general that they do not only apply to the specific phenomenon one is supposed to "know", i.e. to X); the UKM should also explain the syllable/letters example (mentioned above) but in fact it doesn't, because in principle one can have theoretical knowledge of the systematic phonetic relations between letters and still be fallible in the art of spelling. Thaler proposes an alternative account to the UKM of the kind of knowledge of the individual letters that is necessary and sufficient for knowing the syllables (his reading also finds support in two passages from *Statesman* and *Republic*): rather than possessing an account of individual and relational phonetic properties, such a knowledge

would consist of «the ability to properly recognize each and every letter in the various combinations in which it appears»; this is a sort of "know how" that is not reducible to a descriptive set of propositions about the properties of a given letter. Getting to the target of the analogy, the "spelling model" is different in the UKM, Thaler argues, because it entails a *necessitating* relation between elements and the "whole" of which they are elements; indeed, the facts for which the elements account are the *only possible* manifestation of the elements themselves, rather than being just one possible arrangement of things among a myriad others that would be compatible with the elements: this entails that if one knows something, one must know both *that* and *why* what one knows could not have been otherwise. Indeed, another side of the spelling analogy is that the elements are abstractions which do not really exist independently of what they account for (though this fact does not undermine their explanatory priority). The trouble with the Dream Theory is not that, as the UKM suggests, it fails to recognize that what is missing is a grasp of the systematic relations between the elements – conceived of as independent unities – but that it takes the elements as "quasi-physical" objects, in other terms it *reifies* them: this discussion would contain Plato's criticism of a deep, common feature of most Presocratic ontologies (especially Democritus, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras).

The last Section of the book, concerning relevant examples of the *Theaetetus' Wirkungsgeschichte*, opens with the insightful paper of *Walter Cavini* (*Doxa* and *Epistēmē* in Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*) concerning the Aristotelian view of scientific knowledge and Aristotle's critical reception of the epistemological insights underlying the *Theaetetus* Third Hypothesis (or definition) about what knowledge is. Given that Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* are the two greatest masterpieces of ancient epistemology, Cavini enquires about the presence of the *Theaetetus* in the *Analytics* and the ways in which the latter critically embodies insight provided in the former: he individuates two reactions to the failure of the third definition of *Theaetetus* (knowledge = *true doxa* «*meta logou*») in *Posterior Analytics*, in Apo I 33 and in Apo II 19. In Apo II 19 Aristotle says that any *epistēmē* is «*meta logou*»: but the *epistēmē* that is *meta logou* is not *doxa* (said to be *meta logou* in the *Theaetetus* Third Definition of *epistēmē*), and also the sense in which *epistēmē* is *meta logou* is different from the sense in which knowledge is said to be *alethes doxa meta logou* in *Theaetetus* Third Definition: in Aristotle's passage this expression means "through syllogistic reasoning" and contrasts *epistēmē* not with simply-true opinion but with *nous*, a non-syllogistic grasp of the first principles and axioms from which scientific syllogisms derive theorems and conclusions. In Apo I 33 Aristotle would accomplish what Cavini labels the «modal turn» in Greek epistemology by holding that *epistēmē* is not *doxa* (and the knowable

objects or *epistata* are not the "*opinable*" objects or *doxasta*) and reshaping the Platonic opposition between sensible (object of opinion) and intelligible (object of knowledge) into the opposition between contingent and particular on the one hand, and necessary and universal on the other. A central novelty of Aristotle's theory of the *doxa/epistēmē* relation would be that he considers both states as species of same genus, the *hypolepsis*, an Aristotelian technical neologism which Cavini suggests is best translated as "belief", as it essentially means "holding true": indeed – as a passage of *De An.* III 3 makes clear – two non-overlapping species of holding true (P) would be *doxa*, i.e. *opinion* (that P), and *epistēmē*, i.e. *knowledge* (that P), such that if you hold P true *without knowing* P, then you "opine" P. In this model, knowledge could never be opinion, not even true opinion with *logos*. This entails an inversion of the explanatory order, so that it is opinion that is accounted for by reference to knowledge (as a holding-true without knowledge) rather than knowledge by reference to opinion (as an opinion plus something else, e.g. "truth" and "*logos*"). Being a rejection of a "conjunctivist" model in favour of a disjunctivist one, this insight anticipates certain views in contemporary epistemology such as Williamson's (in Williamson's *Knowledge and its Limits*, 2000). Aristotle would also never try to say what knowledge is, but rather tries to individuate some of its fundamental features: in Apo I 2 he characterizes *epistēmē* as a *gignoskein* of the causes (and/or of the why), but if this was a definition it would be circular, provided that an independent definition of *gignoskein* is not to be found elsewhere (in *Phys.* I 1 he says that we hold that there is *gignoskein* of X when there is *gnorizein* of the elements of X: here *gnorizein* takes the place of *gignoskein* and *gignoskein* takes the place of *epistasthai*). Cavini argues that these characterizations are not meant to be definitions of knowledge: with an oscillating cognitive vocabulary, Aristotle would never attempt to provide a definition of knowledge but would only argue that knowledge entails a cognition of the causes and of the "why" of what is known (and that the known object cannot be otherwise). As, too, did Plato, Aristotle holds that knowledge has essentially to do with grasping the causes, but this does not deny that the notion of knowledge is more primitive than other notions such as "opinion", in such a way that the novel Aristotelian view could well be taken as critically treasuring the failure of the *Theaetetus*' Third Hypothesis about what knowledge is.

Giovanna Rita Giardina (Homoiôsis Theôi (*Plato*, Theaet. *176b1*) *in Late Neoplatonism*) carefully analyses the most relevant Late Neoplatonic texts about the notion of "assimilation to god" (consisting of «being pious and just with *phronesis*»), a mission Socrates assigns to the philosopher – but in reality to every human being – in a famous passage (176a5–b2) contained in the so-called "Digression", placed at the very core of the *Theaetetus*. After a rapid

survey of analogous passages in Plato's *corpus* (in *Republic* VI and X*, Timaeus, Laws*), Giardina briefly retraces the reception and uses of Platonic "assimilation to god" in Middle Platonism, then individuates in Plotinus a turning point, since Plotinus, who privileges the theoretic life over praxis and civic virtues (conceived of as preparatory for pure contemplation), reads the Platonic passage accordingly as a radical abandonment of the earthly and bodily dimension (followed by his pupil, Porphiry): significantly, he identifies the god man should assimilate to, with the hypostasis of the Intellect. Plotinus is followed by Porphiry and Iamblichus – then by (the Neoplatonic) Hierocles a century later – in distinguishing, in Plato, civic from "cathartic" virtues and in giving a special "purificatory" role to *phronesis*, with the support of some passages of the *Phaedo* (a dialogue which from now on becomes central for reading the assimilation to god as an escape from the bodily life or as a "deification"). Whilst neither Sirianus, nor Proclus nor Simplicius explicitly discuss our passage, Hermias refers to it in his commentary on the *Phaedrus* – another dialogue which contains explicit reference to (love as) the imitation of god (253a–b) – as his son and successor, Ammonius, does in his commentary on Proclus' *Isagoge*. Ammonius, together with Elias and David (in their respective commentaries on the *Isagoge*), discusses at length different definitions of philosophy (some depending on the subject matter, some on the purpose, on the superiority of philosophy over other sciences, or on the etymology of the word); two of the definitions, attributed to Plato, are "to pursue death" and "assimilation to god as far as it is possible for a man". This last one and the explanation of it by these three authors, is the focus of Giardina's careful reconstruction: Ammonius takes such assimilation as being both theoretical and practical, given that god engages in both cognitive and providential activity; thus he, Ammonius, goes beyond Plotinus' unilateral reading, and he is followed in this by Elias and David who take Lycurgus (philosopher and lawgiver) as a model. These last two critically discuss and correct others' reading of our passage: one issue they discuss is the ontological difference between man and god and the attempt to conceive of an asymmetrical likeness; they note that Plato himself added the clause "as far as it is possible for a man", and so referred to the ontological gap, and they go on to explain that the philosopher would be made good by participation, the god by its own essence; the philosopher would want everything that is in his power, but only god can do everything it wants; the philosopher knows only certain things, while god knows everything simultaneously and eternally. David quotes our passage in its entirety and equates philosophy with a flight from evil, by arguing that philosophy is an exercise in dying, i.e. in mortifying those affections which cause evil. Both of them also discuss the relation between justice, piety and *phronesis* in Plato's expression, «being pious and

just with intelligence (*phronesis*)», as well as the absence of the other basic virtues individuated in the *Republic*. A last step in Giardina's reconstruction concerns the reception of Plato's formula in Christian Neoplatonism, in particular by John Philoponus in his *De Opificio Mundi*. Philoponus, as expected, refers to our passage through discussing the (Greek translation of the) passage in *Genesis*, «And God said, Let us make man in our image and likeness»: he explains that such likeness is potential, as it depends on man's effort to be godlike and «assimilate himself to god». The combination of theory, practice and catharsis involved in the assimilation to god allows Philoponus to connect the Platonic passage with the Genesis passage in a philosophically interesting and creative way.

With the contribution of *Aldo Brancacci* (*Berkeley, the* Theaetetus*, and the Platonic Theory of Ideas*) we take a step into Modern thought. Brancacci offers a reconstruction of the references to Plato's *Theaetetus* that Bishop Berkeley makes in his *Siris*, thus filling a gap in the literature and shedding light on the theoretical context to be found in the background of such very meaningful references. Plato is often referred to by Berkeley with regard to the theory of Ideas, and more generally is paid the highest tribute (together with Aristoteles and Pythagoras, whom he contrasts with «barbaric Scholasticism»). Berkeley associates Plato with Pythagoras, as both theorize a three-level ontology including a) an inalterable, motionless and invisible kind of reality (graspable only by the intellect), b) the mutable and unstable world of sensible things (graspable through senses *and* belief), and c) the "matter", an indestructible level or reality that neither the intellect nor the senses can detect but which needs to be postulated anyway (this obviously recalls Plato's *Timaeus*: Berkeley equates Platonic *chōra* with matter, as had already been done within the Neoplatonic tradition). In another passage (*Siris* § 308), Berkeley refers to the theory of Ideas in more gnoseological terms and opposes Plato to Aristotle as respective representatives of innatism or of the idea of human mind as a *tabula rasa à la* Locke. Then (§ 309), he seems to implicitly refer to *Meno* and *Phaedo* since he speaks of sense experience as providing occasions for "awakening" innate notions in the mind (the theme of drowsiness, from *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* is focused on again at § 313), and he also distinguishes Locke's singular ideas from Plato's universal Ideas. He demonstrates a deep understanding of the status of Platonic ideas, which are characterized as being not simply inert objects, but effective causes and principles, as not being mere cognitive products of the soul or abstract entities (as Locke held), but very real beings (cf. § 335). He returns to *Theaetetus* many times: for example, when he argues that senses, strictly speaking, do not understand anything (§ 253); or when he recalls Socrates' refutation of Protagoras' *homo mensura* doctrine and argues for the

superiority of the expert's knowledge (*ibidem*); or by looking back to the doctrine of *koina* and the correlative gnoseological view according to which we sense not "with" our sense organs but "by means of" them; again, he treasures Plato's principle – to be found also in the *Theaetetus* – of the unreality of sensible things (§ 304), and hence the gap between being (subject to intellectual knowledge) and becoming (unknowable); later in the same work (§ 345), he comes back to the *Theaetetus*, first with regard to the *unity* of human soul, then, concerning the opposition between the "party" of the Flux Ontology (Heraclitus, Protagoras, Empedocles) and that of the Ontology of Permanence (Parmenides, elsewhere praised for identifying *noein* and *einai*) (§ 348), he praises Plato's two-level Ontology which makes room for permanent entities (Ideas) as well as for sensible things; other passages, about the ascent from the sensible level to intellectual life and about becoming virtuous through understanding (e.g. § 330), also have the *Theaetetus* in the background though the dialogue is not explicitly mentioned. Despite the obvious differences, Berkeley and Plato ultimately converge on a view of the real being as "made out" of immaterial ideas, as well as on a "decayed" conception of the ontological status of the sensible being. Brancacci carefully shows how this speculative convergence confirms the depth of Berkeley's understanding of Plato's ontology, and also how the *Siris* contains interpretive elements from and insights into Plato's work – the *Theaetetus* included – which at least foreshadow the nineteenth century paradigm of "historical" hermeneutics.

Each paper briefly described above represents a new advance in its respective field of research, be it a topic relevant to Plato's *Theaetetus* itself, or to a given "heritage" this Dialogue has engendered in the philosophical thought of ancient or modern times. It is hoped that this book will become a point of reference for future research into Plato's *Theaetetus* and, more generally, a useful tool both for scholars and for non-academic readers who wish to better understand and appreciate this extraordinary and fascinating Dialogue.

Diego Zucca

SECTION 1

The Theaetetus *and Plato*

CHAPTER 1

Themes in the *Theaetetus*

Gail Fine

1

The *Theaetetus* is generally thought to have been written after the *Parmenides* but before the *Sophist*.[1] There are three interlocutors: Socrates (who famously, and only in this dialogue, compares himself to an intellectual midwife, giving birth to others' ideas), the young mathematician Theaetetus, and his teacher Theodorus. Like many Platonic dialogues, the *Theaetetus* focuses on a «What is F?» question, in this case «What is knowledge (*epistēmē*)?».[2] Three answers are considered:[3] that knowledge is perception (KP); that it is true belief (*doxa*) (KTB);[4] and that it is true belief with an account (*meta logou*) (KTBL). Each answer is rejected; and so the dialogue ends in *aporia*, though it is sometimes thought that Plato hints that he favors the final, or some further, answer. Let's look at each answer in turn, beginning with the first.

---

1 *Theaetetus* 183e7–184a1 is sometimes thought to allude to the *Parmenides*. The *Theaetetus* ends with Socrates suggesting that he and Theodorus meet again the next morning; the *Sophist* begins with Theodorus saying they (Theodorus and others, including Theaetetus) have come as agreed the previous day.

2 It's been argued that *epistēmē*, as Plato conceives of it, isn't knowledge as we conceive of it nowadays. I don't have the space to engage with this issue here. The reader can consider how Plato conceives of *epistēmē* in the *Theaetetus* and draw his or her own conclusion about whether it amounts to knowledge in a recognizable sense of the term. «Knowledge» is used in the two best English translations of the dialogue: that by MCDOWELL (1973), (which also contains full and illuminating notes) and that by M.J. Levett, rev. by M.F. Burnyeat (BURNYEAT 1990, which also contains an indispensable introduction by Burnyeat).

3 Actually, four: Theaetetus initially suggests that geometry, shoemaking, and the like are kinds of knowledge (*epistēmē*) (146c7–d3); but Socrates dismisses this as not being the right kind of answer for, among other things, it says what knowledge is of, whereas the correct answer should say what knowledge is: knowledge can't be defined in terms of its objects.

4 It's been argued that *doxa*, as Plato conceives of it, isn't belief as we conceive of it nowadays. The reader can consider how Plato conceives of *doxa* in the *Theaetetus*, and draw his or her own conclusion about whether it amounts to belief in a recognizable sense of the term. *Doxa* is sometimes translated as «judgment» rather than as «belief».

2

Rather than exploring KP on its own, Socrates links it to Protagoras' view that man is the measure of all things (P) and to Heraclitus' view that everything is in flux (H). One connection he considers, and the one I'll focus on, is that P provides an epistemology that supports KP, and H provides an ontology that supports P. It's not that Plato accepts P or H, or even thinks they imply KP; rather, they are its best hope. If they are false, or if the connections among the three theses that he describes don't in fact obtain, so much the worse for KP.[5]

KP seems implausible.[6] At least, it's often thought that there can be knowledge of things that can't be perceived – numbers, say, or god, or immaterial souls – in which case knowledge doesn't imply perception. Nor is it obvious that perception implies knowledge. For example, an infant who sees an X-ray doesn't know what it is. On the other hand, if someone sees that this is an X-ray, one might be tempted to infer that she thereby knows that it is. Evidently, then, the plausibility of KP depends on how perception is conceived: and also, of course, on how knowledge is conceived. The more demanding one's standards for knowledge are, the less plausible KP is. For example, if one can know that p is true only if one can explain why it is,[7] then merely seeing that the cat is on the mat isn't sufficient for knowing that it is.

3

At 152a, Socrates says that KP says the same thing as Protagoras, though «he put the same point in a different way»: that «a man is the measure of all things: of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not». Or, as Socrates rephrases this: «everything is for me the way it appears to me, and is for you the way it appears to you».[8] Socrates explains what this means

5 This is essentially Burnyeat's Reading B, in contrast to his Reading A, on which Plato thinks P and H give a correct account of perception and its objects: see BURNYEAT (1990). Reading B is also defended by DAY (1997), Reading A is defended by CORNFORD (1935)(=2003), though he too thinks that the discussion is dialectical (p. 30) and that Plato accepts P and H only «when they are guarded and limited with the necessary qualifications» (31). Reading B fits well with Socrates' characterization of himself as a midwife giving birth to others' ideas: 148e1–151d6, 210c–d; see also the references to birth at e.g. 160e–161a.

6 At least, that's so if (as I think) perception is here sense perception rather than awareness more generally. But see e.g. DANCY (1987), pp. 62–63.

7 This is a condition on knowledge in *Meno* 98a.

8 The first remark is generally thought to be a quotation from Protagoras, the second Plato's rephrasing of it.

by introducing the problem of conflicting appearances:[9] the same wind might appear cold to you but not to me. What should we infer? One answer is that the wind is, in or by itself, cold or not cold (where these are exclusive options), and so one of us is just wrong about the wind. Protagoras favors a different answer: that the wind is cold to the one to whom it appears cold but not to the one to whom it doesn't so appear (or to whom it appears not cold). But what does that mean?

Different answers have been suggested. On one of them, P expresses relativism (PR): p is true for A if and only it appears to A that p – i.e. if and only if A believes that p – where that implies that there is no such thing as being flat-out true; there are only people's beliefs.[10] On an alternative that I favor, P expresses, not relativism, but infallibilism (PI): p is true if and only if someone believes that it is. Whereas PR denies that any beliefs are flat-out true, PI says that all beliefs are flat-out true.[11]

4

Suppose we assume P and take perception to be being appeared to:[12] for me to perceive the wind as cold is for the wind to appear cold to me. Then since, given P, all appearances are true (to those who have them), things are (to me) however I perceive them to be. In that case, perception is of what is and is free from falsehood: it satisfies "two marks" of knowledge.[13]

9 For an interesting discussion of the problem of conflicting appearances, see BURNYEAT (1979).

10 But doesn't PR then say no more than that as I believe things are, so I believe they are, and isn't that a tautology? Yes, but the point is that that's all there is; we can't go on to ask «And are things as you believe they are?» – and that is not a tautology.

11 For a defense of PR, see BURNYEAT (1976), pp. 172–95. There are also other accounts of Protagoras' alleged relativism. I discuss Burnyeat, and defend PI, in FINE (1998a), (1998b). See also my FINE (1996), pp. 1–5, p. 33. These three papers are reprinted in my FINE (2003).

12 Plato explicitly rejects this account of perception in *Soph*. 264b; and, as we shall see, it is implicitly rejected in 184–6. He tries it out here as part of his dialectical effort to see what can be said on behalf of KP.

13 CORNFORD (1935)(= 2003), p. 32. It's not entirely clear how to interpret the two marks. «Is» can be used for, *inter alia*, truth, existence, reality, and predication. These different uses yield different interpretations of the first mark. As to the second mark, there are two ways of being free from falsehood: being true (or truth-entailing), and being neither true nor false. Even if perception satisfies both marks, one might object that doing so isn't sufficient for being knowledge. For example, true belief is truth-entailing, but it isn't sufficient for knowledge.

Here we should note that, though P is initially stated in general terms – *everything* is for one as it appears to one – Socrates says that appearing (or being appeared to) and perceiving are the same «in the case of what's hot and everything of that sort» (152c). This gives us *Broad Protagoreanism* (BP) and *Narrow Protagoreanism* (NP). According to BP, *all* appearances (i.e. beliefs) are true (to those who have them). According to NP, all *perceptual* appearances (i.e. beliefs) are true (to those who have them). It's NP that's used to support KP.[14]

If, as Socrates says, perception is free from falsehood, it's *incorrigible*. If being free from falsehood is being true,[15] perception is also *infallible*. That removes a threat to perception's claim to be knowledge: one might argue that it can't be knowledge because we can misperceive, but knowledge is always true. Socrates blocks this move by interpreting perception in Protagorean terms, so as to yield the conclusion that all perceptions – including those we have when dreaming, ill, or insane – are true.[16]

5

If all perceptual beliefs (appearances) are true, and if there are conflicting perceptual beliefs (appearances), P seems to violate PNC. But whether it does so depends on what the world is like. If, at t1, I believe the wind is cold and you believe it's not, and our beliefs are about the same (part of the same) wind, and both beliefs are true then, given PI, the wind is simultaneously cold and not cold in a way that violates PNC. If, however, we perceive either the same wind at different times or different winds (or different parts of the same wind), there is no contradiction: in the first case, we can say that the wind changed in the interval; in the second case, we aren't talking about the same thing.

This is where H comes in: Socrates describes a Heraclitean theory of perception according to which for a stone to be white, for example, is for it to come into contact with an eye; this gives birth to a token occasion of seeing and a whiteness-token (156a–c; cf. 153d–154a), each of which exists only for

14 Plato also distinguishes BP from NP at 171e and 178b5.

15 According to PR, all beliefs are free from falsehood because no beliefs are flat-out true or false. According to PI, all beliefs are free from falsehood because they're all flat-out true.

16 For the objection that we misperceive when we dream or are ill or mad, see 157e–158e. Ancient sceptics, as well as Descartes in Meditation 1, appeal to dreams and disease to induce a certain level of scepticism: since appearances are, or seem to be, equally balanced, we should, or do, suspend judgment either way. Plato, on Protagoras' behalf, suggests instead that since we can't tell whether we're awake or asleep (or ill or well, or mad or sane), we should accept all our appearances as true.

the duration of that particular perceptual encounter; and each of which exists only in relation to the other. As the theory is developed, it becomes clear that no two perceivers can ever perceive the same thing; nor can the same perceiver perceive the same thing twice. Eventually perceivers and objects are collapsed into collections of perception-tokens and quality-tokens; hence neither perceivers nor objects persist over time.[17]

Once the details are fully spelled out, we are left with Extreme Heracliteanism (EH): every object, at every moment, changes in every respect. Since the same thing can't be perceived twice or by more than one person, perception is incorrigible. And since for an object to be e.g. white is just for it to be perceived to be so, perception is also infallible – and it is so without violating PNC.

This supports PI: H – more precisely, EH[18] – explains how all perceptual beliefs can be flat out true without violating PNC. By contrast, it's not clear what H's role is if PR is in play. For according to PR, there is no way the world is; you and I don't contradict one another when you say the wind is cold and I say it isn't, because neither claim is flat-out true. Relativism doesn't need (and indeed can't allow) an ontology (if an ontology specifies how the world is). A further problem for PR, and a further count in favour of PI, is that the qualifier 'to one' is often omitted: Socrates often speaks of something's being F, rather than saying it is F to someone. This is legitimate on PI but not on PR. However, it might seem to be a problem for PI that the qualifier is sometimes included. But that can be explained in terms of privacy: when the wind appears cold to me, it is cold – but since only I can perceive just that coldness-token, it's cold just to me in the sense that no one else has access to it.

6

By 160e, Socrates has completed his defense of KP. He then turns to the offensive, refuting each of P, H, and KP in turn.[19] The objection to P that has attracted

17 Here I agree with BOSTOCK (1998), p. 70; BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 18–19; and SEDLEY (2004), pp. 46–47. Contrast CAMPBELL (1883), p. 62, n. 11; and BROWN (1993): they think the collections mentioned in 157b9 are (not individuals such as this man and that one, but) kinds of things (such as man).

18 Plato describes a variety of Heraclitean doctrines, arguing that only EH is strong enough to provide the needed support for P and so for KP.

19 Before presenting his final refutation, he makes some preliminary objections to KP (161b–164c) which, however, he dismisses as being "logic chopping" (164c) – though they are in fact stronger than he gives them credit for being. He also has Protagoras defend himself against an objection (166a–168c).

the most attention is the so-called "self-refutation" argument (169e–171d), which is actually a series of three connected arguments.[20] One of them goes as follows: Suppose P is true, but someone believes it is false. In that case, it is false: for P says that all beliefs are true; hence the belief that P is false is true. So P, coupled with the premise that someone believes that P is false, implies that P is false.

It's sometimes thought that the argument aims to refute PR but fails to do so, since it omits the crucial qualifier "to one"; once it is included, as it must be to avoid begging the question, we can see that the argument shows, not that PR is false, period, but just that it's false to someone, i.e. that someone doesn't believe it – which doesn't refute PR. At least three replies are possible: (a) though the argument aims to refute PR but fails to do so, it succeeds in raising difficulties for it that fall short of strict refutation;[21] (b) the argument aims to refute PR and succeeds in doing so;[22] (c) it aims to refute PI and succeeds in doing so; PR isn't at issue here or elsewhere in discussing P.[23]

The "self-refutation" argument challenges BP, the claim that *all* beliefs or appearances are true. At 171e, Socrates says that NP has not yet been refuted, adding that many would accept P in the case of what's just or unjust[24] and in religious matters.[25] But, he claims, many would reject P in the case of questions about who's healthy or unhealthy, and in the case of what's beneficial or advantageous; here people rely on experts. If, for example, at t1 the doctor and I disagree about whether I'll be well at t2, it's not that I'll be both well and ill at t2; rather, at t2 one of us will be shown to have had a false belief at t1 about how I'll be at t2. Though the self-refutation argument has gotten more attention, Theordorus places more weight on the argument from expertise, though he thinks the self-refutation argument is also effective (179b).[26]

---

20 In addition to the articles cited in n. 11, see WATERLOW (1977); and CASTAGNOLI 2010, and CASTAGNOLI 2004.

21 MCDOWELL (1973), p. 171; BOSTOCK (1988), pp. 84–99.

22 This is a central argument in BURNYEAT (1976).

23 FINE (1998a).

24 See 172 which, however, says that *states* determine what's just for themselves, whereas earlier it was each *individual* who determines how things are (for him or herself).

25 It's not clear whether justice and religious issues fall within the scope of NP. Though there is no formal argument against P's holding in these cases, the "digression" advocates a view that is incompatible with P's giving a correct account of them. See next note.

26 In between the self-refutation argument and the argument from expertise is a passage Plato calls a digression (177b; the passage as a whole occupies 172a1–177c4). However, it's relevant to the matters at hand. For example, it assumes that there is objectivity, which is incompatible with P. The passage is well discussed by SEDLEY (2004), pp. 64–86.

7

Plato next turns to EH (181–3). There's dispute about what the argument's conclusion is. On one view, it's that *nothing*, including sensibles, can be in EH.[27] On another view, it's that *not everything* can be in EH. Proponents of the second view differ about what escapes EH: forms and/or the meanings of terms?[28] Quality tokens?[29] On a third view, the conclusion is that if anything were in EH, we couldn't know that it was.[30] In favor of the view that the argument's conclusion is that nothing, not even sensibles (e.g. stones), can be in EH is the fact that, in the rest of the dialogue, it's assumed that sensibles persist through time and retain some of their characteristics.[31]

It's sometimes thought that Socrates defends this view by arguing that EH implies the collapse of language and so undermines itself.[32] I incline instead to the view that the passage argues that sensibles can't be in EH because something can change in some respects only if it is stable in other respects, yet EH precludes all stability, both at and over time. Indeed, EH precludes sensibles from even having properties; for something can have a property only if it's stable, at least for a moment. Hence EH precludes change in properties; but all change is change in properties, so EH turns out to be incompatible with change.

At 182e Socrates says that if EH were true, we wouldn't be able to speak of anything as a case of seeing (F) any more than as a case of not seeing (F) or, more generally, of anything as a case of perceiving (F) than as a case of not perceiving (F).[33] For, as we've seen, it turns out that, on EH, nothing is F any more than it is not F. Hence 'when we were asked what knowledge is, we gave as our answer [= KP] something that is no more knowledge than not

27 See e.g. OWEN (1986), pp. 72–73, which begins by saying: «What he plainly points out is that if *anything* (and anything in this world, not the next) were perpetually changing in all respects, so that at no time could it be described as being so-and-so, then nothing could be said of it at all – and *inter alia*, it could not be said to be changing». See also BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 42–52.

28 CORNFORD 1935 (=2003), pp. 95–101; SILVERMAN (2000).

29 MCDOWELL (1973), note on 182c9–183b6.

30 COOPER (1975). This view leaves open the possibility that EH is true.

31 Of course, the mere fact that sensibles (e.g. stones) aren't in EH doesn't imply that nothing is. But the crucial issue is whether sensibles are exempt from EH.

32 BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 42–52. For criticism, see BROWN (1993); SEDLEY (2003); and SEDLEY (2004), pp. 97–99. (However, he thinks that, though Plato doesn't explicitly say so, his argument implies the collapse of language.)

33 I follow MCDOWELL (1973), note *ad loc.*, in taking the point to be, not that e.g. seeing turns into or is replaced by hearing, or is no more seeing than hearing but, rather, that we are no more seeing e.g. whiteness than not seeing it.

knowledge' (183c). H was initially introduced to support P which, in turn, was introduced to support KP. It turns out, however, that H – more precisely, EH – undermines KP.[34]

In addition to refuting EH, 181–3 also completes the refutation of NP. Earlier passages show that without NP, not all perceptual appearances are guaranteed to be true: we might e.g. misperceive when we are ill. But if we support KP with NP, we also need EH; otherwise, PNC will be violated. Yet on EH, objects don't have properties we can be right or wrong about: in which case not all perceptual appearances are guaranteed to be true. So whether or not EH is true, not all perceptual appearances are guaranteed to be true.

8

In 184–6[35] Socrates gives his final refutation of KP, on the assumption that P and H (i.e. EH) are false.[36] First he says that we perceive *with* the mind (or soul: *psuchē*), *through* the senses. That is, the mind (185e), or person (184d), does the perceiving, using the senses as instruments. The senses don't perceive any more than telescopes do; rather, they enable us to perceive. This emphasizes the unity of consciousness.[37]

Next Socrates distinguishes proper sensibles (properties accessible to just a single sense, such as colours and sounds) from *koina* (properties common to more than one sense, such as being, same, and different, but also one, odd and even, beautiful and ugly). There's dispute about whether the text says, or whether the argument requires, the claim that (a) each sense has access only to its proper sensibles (so that e.g. we can see only colors) or just that (b) there are some proper sensibles. Be that as it may, Socrates proceeds to argue that whereas we can see e.g. a whiteness token, we can't see, or otherwise perceive, any of the *koina*. Hence, we may infer, if they can be known, not all knowledge is perception.

---

34 Refuting EH doesn't refute the milder forms of Heracliteanism that the dialogue also considers (e.g. that some things change, and that every sensible is always changing in at least one respect). But these milder forms of Heracliteanism don't support P or KP.

35 On this much-discussed passage see, among many others, FREDE (1987), reprinted in FINE (1999); BURNYEAT (1976b); COOPER (1970); LORENZ (2006), pp. 76–93; HOLLAND (1973).

36 In doing so, he assumes that perception isn't identical to being appeared to: that way of defending KP has been refuted, and so they turn to another one.

37 This is well discussed by BURNYEAT (1976b). He also argues convincingly that 184–6 is incompatible with the theory of perception described earlier in the dialogue. Contrast CORNFORD (1935) (= 2003), p. 105.

Socrates then argues as follows:[38]

1. One can't have knowledge unless one grasps truth.[39]
2. One can't grasp truth unless one grasps being.
3. Being can't be perceived.
4. Hence perception is never knowledge.

1 makes the familiar point that knowledge is truth entailing. 2 says that a necessary condition for grasping truth is grasping being which, we've been told, is a *koinon*. But what is it to grasp being? On one view, it is to grasp the essence of something, what it really is. On another view, it is to grasp that something really, objectively exists in the external world. On a third view, it is to grasp that something is something or other: «is», or being, is incomplete.[40] It counts against the first two views that grasping being in those ways isn't necessary for grasping truth. On the third view, however, grasping being is necessary for grasping truth, for on it the point is that unless one grasps something as being something or other, one can't grasp any truths about it. If perception can't grasp anything as being something or other, or that anything is thus and so, it is non-conceptual and non-propositional, and so it can't amount to knowledge, or even belief.[41]

It might seem to count against this interpretation that at 186c Socrates says that animals, and infants when they are born, perceive, whereas «calculations about those things, with respect to being and usefulness, are acquired, by those who acquire them, with difficulty and over a long time, by means of a great deal of troublesome education». Yet surely everyone normal acquires concepts and beliefs, and does so, moreover, without difficulty and without needing a long and troublesome education? Two replies are possible. First, one might argue

---

38 More precisely, he eventually argues as follows. I skate over important parts of the argument.

39 More precisely, he says that one can't have knowledge of something unless one grasps the truth of that thing (thanks here to Lesley Brown). One might think this implies or suggests that the relevant sort of truth isn't propositional, but a sort that attaches to objects (e.g. being genuine or real). However, I think "the truth of something" here means "the truth about something", where that is propositional: for that fits best both with the overall argument and with the use of alethic terms in the dialogue as a whole. For example, having rejected KP, they consider whether knowledge is true belief; here truth is propositional truth.

40 The first view is defended by Cornford; the second by Cooper; the third by Frede, Burnyeat, and Lorenz. See also my FINE (2017), at pp. 67–77.

41 Hence, perception, properly understood, doesn't satisfy either of the two marks of knowledge: it's not free from falsehood in the way knowledge must be (which requires it to be truth entailing); nor does it grasp being in the way knowledge (and belief) must do. Contrast CORNFORD (1935)(= 2003), p. 108.

that it's more difficult and time-consuming than one might think to acquire concepts and beliefs.[42] Secondly, one might argue that in *this* passage Socrates isn't contrasting perception with concept or belief acquisition, but with knowledge in particular. Not everyone acquires knowledge; and those who do, do so only after a long and difficult education. Then, in 186c–d, he argues that not only is perception not knowledge but, also, it can't even grasp being and so doesn't even get as far as belief. It counts in favor of this interpretation that, at 187a, they take the capacity that considers being to be belief; hence it's not surprising that they next ask whether knowledge might be true belief.[43]

9

Before discussing KTB directly, they discuss, but fail to explain, the possibility of false belief. Why is false belief discussed at such length? On one view, the point is just that we can't understand true belief unless we also understand false belief.[44] On another view, KTB makes false belief impossible.[45] On this view, the discussion is an indirect refutation of KTB: KTB implies the impossibility of false belief; since false belief is possible, KTB is false.

Plato begins his discussion of false belief by describing two arguments, each of which concludes that false belief is impossible. The first begins with the seemingly innocuous claim that, for any x, one either does or doesn't know x. The second begins with the seemingly innocuous claim that, for any x, x either is or is not. If these initial premises are innocuous then, in order to yield the false conclusion that false belief is impossible, each of the arguments must involve either another premise that is false, or an invalid inference.

According to the first argument, one needs knowledge for belief, and one can't make any mistakes about what one knows. Both claims seem false. Why should *knowledge* be needed for *belief*? It also seems possible to make mistakes about things we know: I might know Jones, or who he is, but falsely believe that he has two sisters. One can also make mistakes about propositions one knows at least in the sense that one might know that p, but falsely believe that it implies q.[46]

---

42 So Frede and Lorenz.

43 I suggest this interpretation in FINE (2017).

44 MCDOWELL (1973), pp. 194 and 226.

45 See my FINE (1979); BURNYEAT (1990), p. 66; BENSON (1992).

46 At least, that's so if one can know that p without knowing what all its implications are. However, that might not be possible if knowledge is defined as true belief. See FINE (1979).

The second argument takes belief to be analogous to seeing: just as one can't see what is not, so one can't believe what is not. It's true that both seeing and believing are of what is, in the sense that they both have content: I can't see and see nothing; I can't believe and believe nothing. But it doesn't follow that the content of belief must be true. There seems to be an equivocation on "is not": being nothing as opposed to being false.[47]

Both arguments are flawed, then. The reader must decide whether Plato is confused, or whether he is suggesting that the proponent of KTB can't avoid them.

Socrates next considers two models of the mind[48] – as a wax tablet and as an aviary – to see whether they can accommodate false belief; he argues that neither can do so. Hence the attempt to explain the possibility of false belief fails. Perhaps, Socrates suggests, that's because one can't explain false belief without knowing what knowledge is (200d). This suggests that their failure is due to KTB. Hence it's not surprising that Socrates next turns more explicitly to it.

KTB is now quickly rejected by means of a counter-example (200d–201c): members of a jury might have a mere true belief about who committed a crime without knowing who committed it; hence true belief isn't sufficient for knowledge. The claim is quite plausible. But Plato has been thought to give two incompatible explanations of it: first, that there's not enough time for the jurors to be taught who committed it (which suggests it could be taught and that teaching can confer knowledge); secondly, that who committed it can be known only by an eye-witness (which suggests it can't be taught).[49]

10

Theaetetus next offers his final suggestion: that knowledge is true belief with an account (*logos*) (KTBL; 201d). Before discussing it directly, Socrates records a dream he says he's had, according to which things are divided into complexes and their constituent elements. Complexes have accounts (that is, definitions in the sense of correct answers to 'What is F?' questions) in terms of their elements; they are knowable, and one can have true beliefs about them. Elements

47 In *Sophist* 263–4 Plato offers an account of false statement and of false belief that avoids this equivocation.

48 Before doing so, they ask whether false belief consists in «other-judging» (*allodoxia*), i.e. judging one thing in place of another: 189c–191a.

49 For discussion, see BURNYEAT (1980), and the reply by Barnes (BARNES 1980).

can't be known, precisely because they have no accounts; but they can be named and perceived.[50] The Dream Theory involves several striking claims: that knowledge requires a *logos* (KL); that there is an asymmetry in *logos* as between complexes and elements (AL); that there is therefore an asymmetry in knowledge as between complexes and elements (AK); and that accounts consist in enumeration of elements (EE).[51] The view that complexes are known in terms of their elements which are themselves unknowable contrasts with a familiar version of epistemological foundationalism according to which complexes are known in terms of basic elements that are even more knowable.[52]

Socrates levels two arguments against the Dream Theory. One is a dilemma: wholes (complexes) are either just their parts (elements) or some one thing that emerges from them. In either case, wholes and parts (complexes and elements) are equally knowable or equally unknowable; either way, AK is false.[53] The other is an empirical argument (206): in learning language, we focus on letters (not whole words); and in learning music, we learn to distinguish individual notes. Hence, elements are knowable.[54]

Since both arguments reject AK, Socrates must reject either KL or AL. If he rejects KL (and so KTBL), he must countenance a way of knowing that doesn't require giving an account. If he rejects AL, he presumably retains KL and must argue that elements no less than complexes have accounts. The fact that Socrates next considers KTBL suggests that, whatever happens next, at least the two criticisms of the Dream Theory don't reject KL.

11

Plato next considers three accounts of the sort of *logos* that might convert true belief into knowledge: (i) «making one's thought plain by means of speech»

50 The claim that elements are perceivable has been thought to restrict their range and that of the complexes they compose. But perhaps Socrates focuses on just one sort of element, using it as a model for a more general claim, without meaning to imply that all elements are perceivable.

51 I borrow this terminology from BURNYEAT (1970).

52 For a very different interpretation, see RYLE (1990). For discussion, see my FINE (1979b), reprinted in my FINE (2003).

53 For discussion, see esp. HARTE (2002).

54 It's sometimes thought that Socrates suggests that elements are not just knowable, but are better known than complexes, which yields a version of foundationalism (though quite a different one from the one advocated in the Dream). However, even if elements are prior in learning, it doesn't follow that they are prior in justification or explanation, which is the crucial issue so far as foundationalism is concerned.

(206d); (ii) being able to enumerate a thing's elements (206e);[55] (iii) «being able to state a mark by which the thing one is asked about differs from everything else» (208c7–8).

Against (i) he argues that everyone normal satisfies it, but not everyone normal has knowledge.

Against (ii) he argues that one could have the true belief that "T", for example, is the first letter of Theaetetus' name, and spell the name correctly (thereby enumerating its elements), yet use "T" incorrectly in spelling another word. In that case, one doesn't know how to spell "Theaetetus" correctly, even though one succeeded in doing so; for one can know one complex only if one knows others to which it is related. Hence correctly enumerating something's elements isn't sufficient for knowing it. Nor is enumerating something's elements necessary for having an account. For elements have accounts. We know the letter "T", for example, when we know that it's a consonant, and when we can use it to spell a variety of words correctly. This is what I have elsewhere called the *inter-relation model of knowledge*.[56] It essentially involves a coherence theory of justification (though *not* of truth): to know a complex, one must not only know its elements but also its relations to other related complexes; and to know an element, one must know its place in the systems of which they are parts, which involves knowing the complexes they constitute in a variety of cases.

In considering (iii), Socrates asks whether we can have a mere true belief about, or must know, the distinguishing mark. Having a mere true belief isn't sufficient for having knowledge, since knowledge must be based on knowledge. But if we must know the distinguishing mark, the definition is circular, for it then says that to know x is to have a true belief about x and to know its distinguishing mark (209e6–210a9). However, if we consider the initial account of KTBL along with Socrates' inter-relation model of knowledge, we can see that we can rewrite the definition so that it is not circular: "Knowledge of x is true belief about x with the ability, when asked, to explain how x differs from other things by explaining its place in the systems of which it is a part". It has been objected that merely being able to say how x is related to other things isn't sufficient for converting true belief about x into knowledge of it, for one could memorize an account without having knowledge.[57] However, KTBL, as just spelled out, doesn't say that just mentioning a *logos* will do. It says

55 This is EE (= Enumeration of Elements).

56 FINE (1979b).

57 BOSTOCK (1988), pp. 243–50; BARNEY (2001), pp. 172–174. See also NEHAMAS (1984); BROADIE (2016).

that one must have the *ability* to mention a distinguishing mark *when asked*. This requires being able to respond to objections and being sensitive to new evidence; if one can do that, one has knowledge.[58]

12

With the ostensible failure of the third account of *logos*, the dialogue comes to an end. On one view, the *aporia* is genuine: though Plato thinks there is an answer to the question «What is knowledge?», he doesn't think he's found it. On an alternative, he thinks there is no answer, because he's come to think that knowledge is unanalyzable.[59] On yet another view, he hints at a positive answer. On one version of this view, the solution is to mention forms.[60] However, earlier in the dialogue, Socrates sharply distinguishes the issue of what knowledge is of from the issue of what knowledge is;[61] his concern is the latter. Another possibility is that he hints that the third account of *logos*, properly understood in terms of the inter-relation model of knowledge, explains what must be added to true belief so as to yield knowledge. It counts in favor of this suggestion that Plato favors it elsewhere, both before and after the *Theaetetus*.[62]

References

BARNES, J. (1980). Reply to Burnyeat "Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief". *Aristotelian Supplementary Volume, 54*, pp. 193–206.

BARNEY, R. (2001). *Names and Natures in the* Cratylus. Routledge and Kegan Paul. New York.

58 See the Introduction to my FINE (2003); and SHIELDS (1999).

59 BROWN (2014), p. xxiv mentions this possibility, noting its similarity with WILLIAMSON (2000).

60 CORNFORD (1935)(=2003), pp. 162–163.

61 See n. 2.

62 Before: *Resp.* 533, 534c; *Phaedr.* 265d–266c. After: *Phil.* 16b–18d; *Soph.* 219a–232a, 264b–268d; *Pol.* 258b–268d, 279a–311c. (the *Phil.* describes the model; the *Soph.* and *Pol.* illustrate it.) Some agree that this is his view in dialogues after the *Theaetetus*, but deny that it is his view in the *Theaetetus* or in dialogues that precede it. Some think that accepting the inter-relation model of knowledge involves rejecting KTBL.

BENSON, H. (1992). Why is there a Discussion of False Belief in the *Theaetetus*?. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 30, pp. 171–99.

BOSTOCK, D. (1988). *Plato's* Theaetetus. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

BROADIE, S. (2016). The Knowledge Unacknowledged in the *Theaetetus*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 51, pp. 87–117.

BROWN, L. (1993). Understanding the *Theaetetus*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 11, pp. 199–224.

BROWN, L. (2014). *Plato:* Theaetetus. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

BURNYEAT, M. (1970). The Material and Sources of Plato's Dream. *Phronesis*, 15, pp. 101–22.

BURNYEAT, M. (1976). Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Philosophical Review*, LXXXVI, pp. 172–195.

BURNYEAT, M. (1976b). Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving. *Classical Quarterly*, NS 26, pp. 29–51.

BURNYEAT, M. (1979). Conflicting Appearances. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 65, pp. 69–111.

BURNYEAT, M. (1980). Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief. *Aristotelian Supplementary Volume*, 54, pp. 173–91.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

CAMPBELL, L. (1883). *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

CASTAGNOLI, L. (2004). Protagoras Refuted: How Clever is Socrates «Most Clever» Argument at *Theaetetus* 171a–c? *Topoi*, XXIII, pp. 3–32.

CASTAGNOLI, L. (2010). Self-Refutation and Dialectic: Plato. In: Id., *Ancient Self-Refutation. The Logic and the History of Self-Refutation Argument from Plato to Augustine*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass., pp. 40–66.

CHAPPELL, T. (2005). *Reading Plato's* Theaetetus. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

CHAPPELL, T. (2006). Reading the περιτροπή: *Theaetetus* 170c–171c. *Phronesis*, LI, pp. 109–139.

COOPER, J.M. (1970). Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge (*Theaetetus* 184–6). *Phronesis*, 15, pp. 123–46.

COOPER, J.M. (1975). Review of J. McDowell, *Plato:* Theaetetus. *Philosophical Review*, 85, pp. 550–60.

CORNFORD, F.M. (2003) (ed. or. 1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge. The* Theaetetus *and the* Sophist. Dover. New York.

DANCY, R.M. (1987). Theaetetus' First Baby: *Theaetetus* 151e–169e. *Philosophical Topics*, (15), pp. 61–108.

DAY, J. (1997). The Theory of Perception in Plato's *Theaetetus* 152–183. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 15, pp. 51–80.

FINE, G. (1979). False Belief in the *Theaetetus*. *Phronesis*, 24, pp. 70–80.

FINE, G. (1979b). Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*. *Philosophical Review*, 88, pp. 366–97.

FINE, G. (1996). Conflicting Appearances: *Theaetetus* 153d–154b, in: Gill, C. and McCabe, M.M. (ed.). *Form and Argument in Late Plato*. Clarendon Press. Oxford, pp. 105–133.

FINE, G. (1998a). Plato's Refutation of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*. *Apeiron*, XXXI, pp. 201–234.

FINE, G. (1998b). Relativism and Self-Refutation in Plato's *Theaetetus*: Plato, Protagoras, and Burnyeat. In: Gentzler, J. (ed.), *Method in Ancient Philosophy*. Clarendon Press. Oxford. pp. 138–63.

FINE, G. (1999) (ed.). *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

FINE, G. (2003). *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

FINE, G. (2017). Plato on the Grades of Perception: *Theaetetus* 184–6 and the *Phaedo*'. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 53, pp. 65–109.

FREDE, M. (1987). Observations on Perception in Plato's Later Dialogues. In: ID., *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, pp. 3–8 (repr. in FINE 1999).

HARTE, V. (2002). *Plato on Parts and Wholes*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

HOLLAND, A.J. (1973). An Argument in Plato's *Theaetetus* 184–6. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 23, pp. 97–116.

LORENZ, H. (2006). *The Brute Within*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato:* Theaetetus. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

NEHAMAS. A. (1984). *Episteme* and *Logos* in Plato's Later Thought. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 66, pp. 105–17.

OWEN, G.E.L. (1986). The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues. In: NUSSBAUM, M. (ed.), *Logic, Science, and Dialectic*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca – New York, pp. 65–83.

RYLE, G. (1990). Logical Atomism in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Phronesis*, 35, pp. 21–46.

SEDLEY, D. (2003). The Collapse of Language? *Theaetetus* 179c–183c. *Plato* <http:/www.ex.ac.uk/plato> 3 (2003).

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism. Text and Subtext in Plato's* Theaetetus. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

SHIELDS, C.H. (1999). The Logos of "Logos". In MCPHERRAN, M. (ed.). *Recognition, Remembrance and Reality* (*Apeiron* 32): Academic Printing and Publishing. Kelowna, BC, pp. 107–24.

SILVERMAN, A. (2000). Flux and Language in the *Theaetetus*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 18, pp. 109–52.

WATERLOW, S. (1977). Protagoras and Inconsistency: *Theaetetus* 171a6–c7. *Archiv für Gheschichte der Philosophie*, LIX, pp. 19–39.

WILLIAMSON, T. (2000). *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

CHAPTER 2

The Structure and Role of the *Theaetetus* in the Platonic Project

Maurizio Migliori

Philosophy is not a theory but an activity
L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus* 4.11

1 How Plato Writes

To understand what Plato wrote, we must start from what he himself affirms in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter* 1) on the limits of philosophical communication, 2) above all of the written one. Without attention to this there is a risk of not adequately reflecting on some of Plato's "strange behaviors". As it is not possible to adequately address the issue here,[1] I will only list some of the more important data.

1) An example of a strange situation: in many passages Plato affirms the need to define a term but then does not define it. The most famous example of this "technique of postponing" regards the Good. In the *Republic*, VI, 506d–507a, Plato puts off the (necessary) treatment of the Good and prefers 1) to talk of the «son of Good and really similar to him», 2) not to pay the debt (= to talk about the Good), but only the interests (= to allude to that through examples). It is now evident that Plato knows the Good because 1) he cannot say that the son is «really similar» to the father if he doesn't know him; 2) nobody can pay interest if they does not know the debt. Nonetheless, Plato does not explain what the Good is.

Likewise in the *Philebus*, Plato instead of telling us what the Good is, merely informs us of its residence (61a–b), before declaring that we are «in the vestibules of its home» (64c). We could (maybe) meet the Good, but the Author does not tell us what the Good is.

1 Cf. MIGLIORI (2013), pp. 25–190; cf. also MIGLIORI 2017, pp. 23–54.

2) More generally we can say that in many cases Plato seems to want to make the issues more difficult for the readers to understand.[2] We can find an example of this technique in the *Sophist*. Plato examines *some* of the most important Ideas to see the relationships between them (254c3–4). Therefore the number of these Ideas is irrelevant, because – with reference to the author's statement – we are not in front of a complete list. There are five meta-ideas: motion-rest, same-different, being.

This looks very simple yet strange, because there are two couples (motion-rest, same-different) which leaves the meta-idea of being "alone". In the *Sophist* Plato needs to clarify the "not-being", however as it is not listed, "being" remains alone without its opposite term. This is a very bizarre situation. We are also struck by such an abundant use of numbers,[3] which are almost embarrassing in their utter futility.[4] In short Plato always writes "five ideas"; perhaps he wants us to reflect on this number, which is certainly not five but more likely to be six or even better eight (I cannot prove here that in my opinion this is the exact number). Whether my solution convinces or not is irrelevant, but it is important and necessary to find an explanation of this situation. I don't believe that an author who elaborates his texts with such care would suddenly start to write many unnecessary numbers for no (apparent) reason.

1.1 *The* Phaedrus

Although many other examples could be provided, for reasons of length it is better to see how in the *Phaedrus* Plato, who is a good teacher, explains the reasons why he decided to write in this strange way.

1) The text repeatedly states that Socrates loves both written and oral speeches. The philosopher even says that he is «ill» from his passion of listening to speeches (228b; cf. also 236e).
2) The text highlights the importance of the written word. Phaedrus is only able to memorize Lysias's speech because the author has given him the text; Socrates twice asks Phaedrus to read the text from the beginning (262d–e); Socrates can also stop Phaedrus reading and then ask him to

2 Even the ancients had noticed this; for example: «Plato employs a variety of terms in order to make his system less intelligible to the ignorant people» (Diog. Laert. III, 63, 1–2).

3 In these few lines Plato repeats the numbers and the "calculations" sixteen times.

4 For example, it makes no sense to say that rest and motion are 2 (254d7), while in relation to "being" they become 3 (254d12); same and different are added to the 3 Ideas (254e3) implying we have to conduct a research on 5 Ideas (254e4) and not 3 (254e5). What reason is there in such a difficult dialogue to point out that 2 + 1 = 3, and 2 + 3 = 5?

start reading again (263e); this is possible because the written word is always available.[5]

3) Socrates claims to have learned things (235c3) from the ancient poets. We can hear the voice of the ancients only by reading their texts.
4) He affirms that powerful men also love writing with reference to the judgment of posterity (257d–258c) i.e. we write for our contemporaries, but also (and perhaps especially) for posterity. In fact, unlike oral communication, the written text persists.
5) Then Plato displays the characteristics that are necessary for a good speech: a person who expounds upon or writes about a subject a) must know the truth about this topic; b) must not despise the "formal" elements elaborated by rhetoricians,[6] because every speech must be considered in its entirety, having parts written in an appropriate manner which are both relative to one another and relative to the whole (264c); c) lastly, he must know the nature of the soul to which the speech is directed. In short, in the same way a doctor evaluates the individual patient, we must each time carefully evaluate the nature of the soul to which it is addressed so as to make a simple speech to a simple soul and a complex one to a complex soul (277b–c).

Then Socrates focuses on the problem of "writing":

> It remains only to deal with the opportunity or not to write, under what conditions it is beautiful and under what conditions it is not appropriate to do it.
>
> *Phaedr.* 274b6–7

The issue is addressed on the basis of a myth (274cff.) about the god Theuth. He invented writing and praises it as an aid to wisdom and memory for all men, but the Pharaoh takes a contrary view and illustrates all the limitations of this medium. Writing does not strengthen but weakens the memory, because people, trusting in the written text, will no longer exercise it. Besides, they will get used to relying not on internal knowledge, but on external signs. Finally, writing does not offer true knowledge, but only the appearance of it (275a6; 276c). Therefore, the readers, having a lot of information «without teaching»

5 In short, only a reflection on written texts has allowed the birth and the development of rhetoric: to elaborate rules it is necessary to have something stable that is able to be analysed; this is only possible with a written text.

6 As ROBIN (1930), p. CLXI, observes, Plato quotes a dozen rhetoricians, but using very generic expressions (cf. 258 D, 266 C, 271 A, 272 C, 273 A, 273 C, 277 D).

(ἄνευ διδαχῆς, 275a7), will believe themselves to be learned men, while they will not know anything. It will be hard to argue with such people (275b).

Worse still, writing has serious limitations, because it appears to be alive yet it is not (275d–e). Indeed it is unable to answer and always repeats the same thing; it does not know how to defend itself, but always needs its author (275e; 276c); it "rolls" into the hands of anyone, either worthy or unworthy. In brief, only a naive person can think to pass on or receive some stable knowledge through written words (275c6; 277d8–9).

It seems like a condemnation without remedy, but it is not. Indeed Socrates adds that there is another form of speech, the «legitimate brother» of the written one (276a1–2), namely oral discourse that is better and more powerful (276a2–3). Oral discourse is

> the speech of they who know, a living and animated speech of which the one written can be said, with good reason, to be an image (εἴδωλον).
>
> *Phaedr*. 276a8–9

There is a strange and peculiar relationship of connection and opposition. We have to accept the evident weakness of the written word without turning it into a condemnation, or worse still, into a refusal: it is a more fragile and weaker brother that should be taken care of. For this, Plato repeatedly makes it clear that one must not put «the most valuable things» in writing.

1.2 *The Written Game*

To sum up, the philosopher is convinced of the radical communicative weakness incumbent to human nature which is accentuated in the written word. Plato tries to address and resolve this problem by inventing the "written game".

In short, the philosophy writer must not write "things of greater value", but provoke the reader with allusions, tricks, omissions, problems and other inventions, in order to force him to "do" – not only to learn – philosophy, that is to think in order to respond to problems that the text imposes. Plato confirms that he is a follower of Socrates: in his writing he tries to maintain the educational attitude of his Master. This choice of not explaining everything, and choosing to proceed by allusions, provocations etc., leads him to define this activity as a "game". The philosopher

> does not write seriously (σπουδῇ) with black water, sowing this knowledge using a straw, with speeches that cannot defend themselves discursively and which cannot properly teach the truth (τἀληθῆ διδάξαι) … But

> he, it seems, will sow them in the gardens of writing and he will write, when he writes, as a game (παιδιᾶς).
>
> *Phaedr*. 276c7–d2

The writing game becomes the principal characteristic of the philosopher. That is

> one who thinks that in a written discourse on any subject there is necessarily a large part of the game (παιδιάν) and that no discourse worth of great seriousness (σπουδῆς) has ever been written in verse or prose.
>
> *Phaedr*. 277e5–8

So what is the difference between a philosopher who writes about mathematics or politics, and a mathematician or politician who write things apparently similar things? If anyone

> has composed these works knowing the truth and being able to come to their aid when he is challenged on the things he wrote, and if speaking is able to demonstrate the weakness of the writing, he must not be called by a name derived from those <the themes that he addresses>, but by what he is dedicated to … To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems excessive and proper only for a deity, but a lover of wisdom (philosopher) or something similar, would be more appropriate for him and more moderate.
>
> *Phaedr*. 278c4–d6

Therefore, the defining characteristics of the "philosopher who writes" consist not only of the knowledge of the truth and the capacity to help the written word, but also and above all the capacity to *orally* demonstrate its weakness. All written texts are only "games", in no way futile, and on the contrary useful. Plato says that they are so important we can dedicate our entire lives to them (276d–e). It is unlikely that he wrote this without thinking of the many dialogues that he had already written.

For reasons of length, I renounce showing how the *Seventh letter* usefully confirms this conception. I only wish to recall a particularly explicit sentence:

> There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one (οὔκουν ἐμόν γε περὶ αὐτῶν ἔστιν σύγγραμμα οὐδὲ μήποτε γένηται, *Sev. Epist*. 341c4–5).

2 The Peculiarity of the "Dialectical" Dialogues

If it is necessary to invite the reader to address issues based on few indications, the gradual proposal of more difficult problems involves a "protreptic" attitude. This allows Plato to build a sequence of texts that gradually become more complex and difficult.

This is exactly the succession of dialogues that we find in the reconstruction based on the "stylometric" method. The frequency of particular expressions and words was statistically calculated starting from the Laws, which are certainly the last work.[7] This analysis makes it possible to classify the texts into different sets.[8] So we have this sequence: 1) many simple texts (for "young readers") that introduce a series of often unsolved problems; 2) some very fine dialogues, based on Ideas, that address many important themes; 3) difficult and very technical dialectical dialogues, which allow to clarify in what sense platonic philosophy is "dialectic"; 4) the final texts that allude to some fundamental metaphysical and cosmological themes, with "games" of extreme complexity.

The afore-mentioned is particularly important for understanding the *Theaetetus*. This, as we will see shortly, serves as an introduction to a trilogy – *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philosopher* – which is in itself exceptional for a number of reasons: 1) it is very compact and presents a perfect sequence of setting and characters; 2) it aims to define the figure of the philosopher diairetically, i.e. by distinguishing it from the two figures which are closest to it (sophist and statesman). The last dialogue, though, was not written: the *Sophist* and *Statesman* are conceived with a view to providing a definition of the philosopher which is not provided. I cannot dwell on this matter, but I can emphasize that this omission is inexplicable in the traditional paradigm, while in the present it is an obvious fact. This situation is consistent with the need, theorised in the *Phaedrus*, to safeguard the "most valuable things" in philosophical writings.

There is another exceptional datum: Plato never mentions his dialogues, whereas here – for the first and only time – we find references which also involve a fifth dialogue, the *Parmenides*. These passages are relevant as they are not required by the subject; hence, we must conclude that the author chose

---

7 The insights of L. Campbell, F. Blass and C. Ritter became a hermeneutic paradigm in the work of W. Lutoslawski (cf. LUTOSLAWSKI 1897); (a masterful analysis of the debate in STEFANINI 1949 pp. LXXII–LXXXI); for a more recent version of this kind of research, see LEDGER (1989); BRANDWOOD (1990) (and the interesting assessments in KAHN 1999, pp. 36–100).

8 Undoubtedly stylometric analyses never yield identical results, as is bound to be the case with any statistically based research. Moreover, one must accept classification by sets and forgo any claim to establish a place of individual dialogues.

to include them for some other reason.[9] This sheds light on the position of the *Theaetetus* and entails certain consequences.

1) Common sense suggests that a text which refers to another text must be and, hence, ought to be read subsequently. In brief, Plato has given us a reading order.
2) We find here a particular form of what Sedley 2004 describes as the "subtext": that range of elements that come into play alongside verbal exchanges, namely body language, para-verbal communication (tone, pitch ...), etc. The subtext is often a crucial device in communication, revealing a truth that conversation may seek to hide. When it is applied to writing, the subtext brings out a meaning that would otherwise be invisible, a meaning which is present yet concealed *by the author's own choice*: it is a technique which makes it possible to express a concept without expressly doing so. In this case, for instance, it forces us to wonder about the meaning of the "strange" place of the *Theaetetus* within this sequence of dialogues.

Here I agree with a methodological suggestion made by Sedley: the need to constantly ask ourselves why Plato did what he did. We must engage with the genius and the artistic freedom which creates his philosophical theatre. Hence, it is crucial to investigate the meaning of the educational and/or philosophical and/or literary operations undertaken by the author.

To take one initial example within what is emerging, the *Theaetetus* appears to be 1) preceded by a very particular dialogue in which the elderly Parmenides gives a very young Socrates an example of the dialectical work required to address questions pertaining to the theory of the Ideas; 2) followed by two dialogues in which a philosopher from Elea offers examples of dialectical arguments, which are justified, in view of a conclusion that is not laid out in writing.

To sum up, we have here a sequence of five dialogues 1) in which Plato plays various games; 2) whose topic is the highest form of knowledge, "philosophy",

---

9 The *Parmenides* is mentioned in *Theaetetus*, 183e, and in *Sophist*, 217c, in order to recall the encounter between Socrates and Parmenides. This encounter never took place in reality, but only occurred in the fiction of that dialogue. Therefore, the only purpose of this reference is to highlight the link between the two dialogues. The *Theaetetus* is mentioned at the beginning of the *Sophist*, 216a (obviously), and twice in the *Statesman*, 257a and 258a, to remark the similarity between Socrates and Theaetetus (another irrelevant topic). As far as the *Sophist* is concerned, it is repeatedly recalled in the *Statesman* (257a, 258a–c, 266d, 284b7, 284c, 286b). In this latter dialogue, in addition to generic expressions (ἐν τῇ περὶ τὸν σοφιστὴν ζητήσει, 266d5), we find two which would be difficult not to regard as references to the *Sophist* as a text: 1) Plato refers to the previous "discussion" by using an expression (ἐν τῷ σοφιστῇ) which must be translated as «in the *Sophist*» (284b7): 2) speaking of various long talks, mention is made of the *Sophist*'s one on non-being (τὴν τοῦ σοφιστοῦ πέρι τῆς τοῦ μὴ ὄντος οὐσίας, 286b10).

initially presented in the improper guise of "the episteme"; 3) nevertheless, this sequence it is unfinished.

2.1 *The Role of Eleatics*

First of all, this set of dialogues serves to emphasize the importance of the Eleatic dialectic. Plato seems not to know about this philosophical school before writing the *Parmenides* which is impossible, for several reasons.

1) In his dialogues Plato shows that he was very familiar with Gorgias, the author of a polemical treatise *On Not Being* that was clearly of Eleatic inspiration and one that Plato in the *Parmenides* proves to know well.
2) In addition, *Phaedrus* 261a–e correctly links Gorgia to Zeno of Elea: in criticizing the art of contradiction, Plato first remembers Gorgias, then quotes the Eleatic Palamedes,[10] Zeno, which makes the same things appear both one and many, similar and dissimilar, at rest and in motion.
3) In several passages he demonstrates having a clear picture in his mind of the relationship between Sophistics and Eleatism.[11]

Therefore, Plato's silence about the Eleatics is not a sign of ignorance, but yet another indicator of his controlled style of writing, which only conveys what he deems useful for achieve his goal. The Eleatics crop up the precise moment when it is no longer possible to proceed any further without help of a dialectic that redevelops Zeno's technique in the light of a metaphysical perspective (inappropriately) glimpsed by Parmenides in his poem. With a genuine *coup de théâtre*, the hitherto "unknown" Eleatics become masters.

Finally, *Theaetetus* is connected to the dialectical trilogy through a unique procedure. At the end of the dialogue we find a typical device of Platonic dramaturgy: the reference to further debate. Nevertheless, it never happens that the same characters meet again to continue the discussion. The only exception is here: the *Sophist* begins the day after the *Theaetetus*, with the same characters recalling the arrangement made the previous day. They are joined by an Eleatic Stranger, who takes on the role of Master, while Socrates listens. The topic presented is the same, but the *Sophist* more correctly refers to it as *philosophy*, rather than with the generic term *episteme*.[12] Indeed, for Plato true *episteme* is only achieved by philosophy. The text itself says so, the moment Socrates remarks that *episteme* «and wisdom (*sophia*) are one and the same thing» (*Theaet*. 145e6).

---

10 So he remembers the title of the Gorgian text in defence of Palamedes.

11 Cf. MIGLIORI (1999) and (2000).

12 As the gods alone possess true *sophia* (*Phaedr*. 278d3–4; *Symp*. 204a), the pinnacle of human knowledge can only be *philo-sophia*.

Within this framework the *Theaetetus*, a not Eleatic dialogue, appears to constitute an exception. However, 1) mention is made of Elea here too, but as the analysis rests on the Heraclitus-Protagoras axis, the discussion of the Eleatic school is postponed (183c–184b); 2) the only not Eleatic dialogue in this set of texts fails (certainly not by chance), despite Socrates' efforts, and the problem must be taken up again by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Sophist*.

Therefore, the *Theaetetus* raises two problems: 1) Socrates' role; 2) the failure of his inquiry.

3 Socrates' Role in the *Theaetetus*

I anticipate the conclusion: this is perhaps the most "Socratic" dialogue in the entire Platonic *corpus*. Plato emphasises this in several ways: the horizon is entirely pre-Platonic; the contrast is with the sophists, especially Protagoras; Socrates develops the discussion on a basic level such as the sensory one; the Ideas are almost absent, or at any rate irrelevant.

The most revealing element is the "invention" of maieutics. Although this metaphor has been remarkably successful, it 1) has no reliable "historical" confirmation; 2) has no mention in the other dialogues; 3) is presented (149a) with some significant nuances. Theaetetus knows that Socrates is the son of a midwife, Phaenarete, yet he does not know that Socrates exercises the same craft as his mother. He learns this from the philosopher himself, who adds: 1) that Theaetetus should not tell anyone, especially because 2) Socrates has concealed the fact that he performs this craft. Basically, no one knows that Socrates practices midwifery. All this suggests that Socrates never historically spoke of himself in such terms. This is a Platonic invention, which portrays Socratic teaching through a compelling metaphor which is useful for the operation that Plato seeks to carry out in the *Theaetetus*.

Indeed, the dialogue emphasises Socrates' sterility. Although this point is contradicted by many elements in the text, it helps make sense of the "aporetic" ending of the dialogue.

4 The "Aporetic" Ending

Sedley[13] recalls four interpretations:

1) The negative outcome is designed to show that rejection of the Ideas and an empirical approach to knowledge lead to failure (CORNFORD 1935).

13 SEDLEY (1995), pp. 4–6.

2) The *Theaetetus* is a dialectical exercise performed for a kind of open research which is unrelated to the middle dialogues (BURNYEAT 1990).
3) The dialogue approaches the true definition of episteme. The final failure is a move which allows Socrates to act as a midwife: it is left up to the philosopher's interlocutor to discover the truth (the anonymous commentator; cf. BASTIANINI/SEDLEY 1995).
4) The *Theaetetus* provides a Platonic reassessment of Socrates (LONG 1998).

Before evaluating these interpretations, it is worth highlighting a few odd features of this "aporetic" ending. Let's briefly reconstruct the last passages of the dialogue. After having dismissed both Theaetetus' "sensist" definition and Protagoras' theoretical position, the author offers a very different perspective: Socrates asks the young man to erase all that has been said so far and to make a fresh start (ὅρα δὴ νῦν πάλιν ἐξ ἀρχῆς, 187a9–b1).

The treatment of the true opinion revolves around the question of the *logos* that must be added. There are many ways to describe this object. The first (statement through the voice) is irrelevant and almost ridiculous; the second offers the complete enumeration of the elements required to speak with knowledge (ἐπιστημόνως, 207b4) and to grasp the essence of the object (τὴν οὐσίαν, 207c1; οὐσίας, 207c3), the whole (τὸ ὅλον, 207c3–4) through its elements. But the knowledge of parts is not enough because identical parts (such as letters) occur in different wholes. Therefore, a complete enumeration of elements enables one to possess the right opinion and *logos*, yet still not *episteme*.

4.1 *Socrates Is Not a Dialectician*

Socrates thus brings a dialectical theme into play, the relation between the whole and its parts. Previously[14] he mentioned: same-other, like-unlike, one-many etc. and has already raised a basic question:

> Do we say that the syllable is both elements together and, if there are more than two, that it is all the elements, or that is one single Idea that has come into being when they were combined?
>
> *Theaet.* 203c4–6

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the following attempt, the *logos* serves to establish the *difference* which denotes the object of enquiry from all others:

> if you grasp the difference of each thing, that by which it differs from the rest, you will, as some say, grasp its logos; if you reach some common

14 Cf. e.g. *Theaet.* 159a, 186a.

> quality, you will have the logos of those things to which that quality belongs.
>
> *Theaet.* 208d6–9

Therefore, Plato puts forward two kinds of *logoi*: one of differences, which he emphasises, to which he adds, for no apparent reason, the *logos* that enables one to grasp the common quality of things, a "superior" element that connects objects of the same type.

It is easy to identify here an improper (non-dialectic) formulation of the diairetic procedure and of Platonic dialectic in general. Evidently *this* Socrates *here* cannot present it in an adequate way. This explains why the dialogue "fails". However, an important point is mentioned: difference *is not added to, but is constitutive of*, every correct opinion. Otherwise, it would be impossible to distinguish one element from another, for only common characteristics would be left. Now, if difference is intrinsic to every right opinion, it makes no sense to add another opinion with the logos, as this could only add what we already have (209 D–E). It is necessary to think that with the logos, the 'knowledge' of difference is added.

Since knowing is «to grasp *episteme*» (ἐπιστήμην που λαβεῖν, 210a1), this addition has a destructive effect on the definition:

> Then, it seems, if asked, "What is episteme?", he will reply that it is right opinion with the addition of the *episteme* of the difference; this is precisely what the addition of logos would mean, in his conception.
>
> *Theaet.* 210a3–5

This definition is unacceptable: we have fallen into the error we were cautioned against at the beginning (147b), namely placing the *definiendum* in the definition. We must conclude, therefore, that

> neither sensation, nor true opinion, nor logos added to true opinion are episteme.
>
> *Theaet.* 210a9–b2

It is clear, however, that Plato has developed his argument precisely in such a way as to reach this outcome: he offers an explanation of *logos* that leads to a definition whose fallaciousness appears evident.[15]

15 In any case, anyway the nature of this fallacy had already been clarified at the beginning of the dialogue.

4.2 *A Non-negative Conclusion*

The fact that this is a consciously performed operation is confirmed by the overly positive tone of the final lines, especially when compared to analogous cases of the aporetic dialogues of the first period.

> – Are we then, my friend, still pregnant and in travail with the episteme, or have we brought forth everything? T. – Yes, we have, and, by Zeus, Socrates, with your help I have already said more than there was in me.
>
> S. – Then does the maieutic art tells us that all these things are born empty <full of wind> and unworthy of being raised? T. – It does, decidedly.
>
> S. – If after this you will undertake to conceive other thoughts, Theaetetus, and if you will be pregnant, you will be so with better things than these by reason of the present search; if you remain barren, you will be less harsh and gentler to your interlocutors, for you will have the wisdom not to think you know that which you do not know. In fact, only this and nothing more my art can accomplish; nor do I know aught of the things that are known by others, the great and wonderful men who are today and have been in the past.
>
> *Theaet.* 210b4–c6

1) Theaetetus was pregnant and no longer is; in fact, he has begotten more than what he hoped to, thanks to Socrates' questions.
2) What has been produced is not worthy of much consideration or development; in brief, it is necessary to change course.
3) If Theaetetus begets anything else, the work done will bear its fruits. In any case, the research undertaken has improved him and less presumptuous when it comes to such problems. Indeed, Socrates had anticipated that research is always valuable as we either find the object of enquiry or do away with the belief that we know when we don't (187b–c). Therefore, what we have here is not a real "failure", but a limited yet still positive conclusion.
4) The strongest indicator of this is the staunch acknowledgement of the limits of Socrates' thought: only this and nothing more can his art accomplish. This verdict, moreover, had already been anticipated through the figure of the midwife, who was forbidden to give birth.

Socrates himself confirms this. He claims that he is not wise (τὸ μηδὲν ἔχειν σοφόν, 150c6) or, rather, that he *is not wholly wise* (οὐ πάνυ τι σοφός, 150d1), and that he has never discovered anything on his own. Indeed, this Socrates seems unacquainted with Platonic metaphysics and even with the doctrine of the

Ideas. In this respect, Sedley's thesis that should be regarded as a portrayal of the historical or semi-historical figure of Plato's Master is quite convincing.

But Socrates is not totally ignorant, since he is familiar with the maieutic technique and the principles governing it; moreover, his debates and examples imply the possession of knowledge, albeit not wisdom. Therefore, this extreme formulation of Socrates' "lack of knowledge" is chiefly put forward for the sake of the "aporetic" conclusion. In brief, Plato "constructs" the figure of a midwife which enables him to make his teacher fail without offending his memory.

Indeed, Plato must "save" Socrates, for unlike the midwife (who is not *strictly necessary* for giving birth), he is a fundamental figure, so much so that it is said that (obviously) Socrates' art is also capable of causing labour pains (151a9).

Moreover, to avoid possible misunderstandings, Plato highlights Socrates' merit of helping the generation by recalling that some people, in ignoring this contribution and claiming all the credit, had ended up distancing themselves from him, with the result that they later "miscarried", thereby compromising the results they had reached with Socrates (150e).

The invention of the maieutic art thus successfully combines Socratic humility with the attribution of "undeniable" merits and skills to Socrates himself, a teacher who purifies benevolently and in accordance with the divine,[16] standing out as the best man of his day (δικαιότατον, *Seventh Letter*, 324e2). At the same time, Socrates lacks the kind of dialectical knowledge which solely makes it possible to establish the connection between different elements (starting from that between the whole and its parts) required in order to address the issue of knowledge.

Nevertheless, the *Theaetetus* is useful, insofar as the episteme of differences to which it alludes is the dialectic, the theme of the trilogy that "continues differently" (the next day) the investigation into philosophy. So the dialogue clears away and/or clarifies certain issues and also paves the way for the subsequent discussion.

5 The Multifocal Approach of the *Theaetetus*

At this point we can move towards a conclusion by once again drawing upon Sedley, who rejects the conventional idea that the different interpretations are mutually opposed. Rather, he believes that there is some truth to each of them.

16 Cf. the fourth diairesis of the *Sophist*, 226b–231b, a sophist of noble stock, purifier of the soul; cf. MIGLIORI 2007, pp. 39–45.

More radically, we[17] have argued many times argued that Plato and Aristotle, and Classical philosophy in general all display a marked awareness of the complexity of reality, and hence practise what we call "the *multifocal approach*".[18] It is a matter of rejecting the traditional dichotomy (either … or) which all too often contributes to impoverishing Plato's writing, and of accepting diverse perspectives which grasp moments of truth emanating from different points of view.[19]

Therefore,

1) as the Anonymous states, the dialogue constantly moves towards a true definition of knowledge, through a final game that involves Socrates in the role of a midwife, leaving it up to the reader to discover the truth;

---

17 The Macerata school (A. Fermani, L. Palpacelli, F. Eustacchi and myself, plus other young scholars) and E. Cattanei and R. Medda.

18 See CATTANEI/FERMANI/MIGLIORI (2016), containing the following contributions: A. Fermani, *The Multifocal Approach as an Assumption of the Complexity of Reality: a Few Introductory Insights*; F. Eustacchi, *At the Source of the Multifocal Approach: Relations in the Sophistic Context*; A. Fermani, *Man is Unhappy in Many Ways. Some Examples of the Multifocal Approach Inside the Platonic Reflection*; M. Migliori, *Plato: a Nascent Theory of Complexity*; L. Palpacelli, *The Multifocal Approach in* Metaphysics V; A. Fermani, *Some Examples of the Multifocal Approach in Aristotle's Ethics*; L. Palpacelli, *Time and the Stars: Two Examples of Multifocal Approach in Aristotle's Works on Physics*; E. Cattanei, *In Conclusion*. Cf. also the acts of the first interdisciplinary conference (*La realtà ama nascondersi? Il* multifocal approach *come valorizzazione dei profili "visibili" e "invisibili" di una realtà complessa*, Macerata 28 February–3 March 2018). These 22 texts, bringing together neurobiologists, sociologists, philosophers, computer scientists, art historians, criminologists, mathematicians etc. are published in the issue n. 1–2, 2020 of *Humanitas*, pp. 3–237. Cf. also MIGLIORI 2020.

19 «This is … a crucial difference, which makes it so difficult, at times, to understand the thought of Plato (and Aristotle). I express this difficulty through a formula: whereas modern thought, sprung from "clear and distinct ideas" (to quote Descartes), tends to think in terms of "*aut … aut*", which is to say of the opposition between irreconcilable positions available as alternatives, Classical thought, and particularly Platonic-Aristotelian thought, thinks in terms of "*et … et*" (which obviously also includes the – rare – possibility of "*aut … aut*"); in other words, it tends to *broaden the framework and structure of its analysis so as to include the highest possible number of elements*. Classical philosophers do not seem interested in producing an intellectual system, a vision, a definition; instead they want to develop – within a well-defined conceptual horizon that is *so strong at times as to constitute a paradigm* – a range of schemes and models that cannot be juxtaposed and indeed often stand in contrast to one another, and yet are capable of explaining aspects of reality that would otherwise escape us. Ultimately, *Classical thought is designed to understand the world, which is so complex as to require a range of different tools*. From this perspective, some apparently contradictory positions may be found to actually be mutually consistent or at any rate compatible» (MIGLIORI 2013, pp. 163–164).

2) as Cornford argues, the failure of the *Theaetetus* is intentional and is designed to show that rejection of the Ideas and an empirical approach to knowledge leads to failure;
3) as Burnyeat argues, this exercise enables a double dialectical engagement – one within the text, the other between the text and the reader, who must "contend" with the hints provided by Plato;
4) if we grasp the significance of the *Theaetetus* within the set of dialectical dialogues, we can also appreciate Long's proposal, insofar as Plato here takes into account the greatness and the limits of his teacher, before facing a completely different (dialectic)[20] philosophical path.

And Socrates' teaching is taken up by his pupil in a written form, as Sedley emphasises: «I have already stressed that, whereas the dialogue's internal midwifery fails (Theaetetus' offspring have not proved viable, as Socrates remarks at the very end), its external midwifery, practised on us the readers, may yet succeed. Since the first rule of philosophical midwifery is not to hand the right answer to one's interlocutors, but to enable them themselves to give birth to it from their own inner resources, the dialogue unavoidably had to stop short of telling us the right answer to its central question. It by no means follows that Plato himself does not know it» (p. 11).[21]

Although this is all very well from a negative perspective, so to speak, from a positive standpoint it is necessary to highlight the place of this text within the set of the dialectical dialogues. What emerges, then, is that Plato anticipated in the previous dialogue *Parmenides* that it is necessary to go beyond the mere issue of the Ideas:

> No, Socrates, for you try too soon, before you are properly trained, to define the beautiful, the just, the good, and every individual Idea. You see I noticed it when I heard you talking yesterday with Aristotle here. Your impulse towards arguments is noble and divine, you may be assured of that; but exercise and train yourself while you are still young in that art

20 To understand this statement, it is necessary to differentiate the two senses of *dialeghesthai*: as the art of discussion between two or more interlocutors and as a relationship (to distinguish and to connect) between Ideas (cf. MIGLIORI 2013, pp. 307–312).

21 Above all we are following the interpretation provided by the Anonymous «which, although current in antiquity, seems to have gone virtually unnoticed in the modern discussions. I shall christen this the "maieutic" interpretation. (…) The final definition, as construed in the closing pages of the dialogue, is so close to the true one that Socrates has to stop there and then. Why must he stop? Because, as the dialogue itself tells us, the correct philosophical method is that of midwifery where it falls to the interlocutor, and no one else, to give birth to the true doctrine…. Judged in this way, the dialogue's failure is only an apparent one» (SEDLEY 2004, p. 5).

> which may seem to be useless and which is considered by most people a mere word game; otherwise the truth (ἡ ἀλήθεια) will escape you.
>
> *Parmenides*, 135c8–d6

As further confirmation of this, Zeno states:

> for people do not know that except by this detailed exploration of all possibilities, it is impossible for intelligence (νοῦν) to know the truth (τῷ ἀληθεῖ) when it encounters it.
>
> *Parmenides*, 136e1–3

Without dialectic, one is bound to fail, an event that is "told" in the *Theaetetus*. Then in the two subsequent dialogues Plato begins to explain the various aspects of the complex work of distinguishing and connecting things:

> to distinguish by classes (κατὰ γένη) and not to consider different an Idea (εἴδος) which is identical, or identical one that is different, belongs to the science of dialectic (τῆς διαλεκτικῆς ἐπιστήμης).
>
> *Soph.* 253d1–3

Indeed, over the course of this dialogue, Plato repeatedly stresses the complex relations that connect or separate Ideas (253b8–c3, 253d5–e2). Only by accepting the dialectical approach and hence by significantly limiting the role of the semi-historical Socrates,[22] is it possible to understand the one-many nature of reality. Once this is done Plato can approach the two main issues of interest to him as a theoretical philosopher who propose a broad metaphysical and cosmological framework, with evident contributions from the Eleatics and the Pythagoreans:

1) The problem of the co-presence of unity and multiplicity, i.e. the "uni-multiplicity" of reality, which leads Plato to make an apparently extreme claim:

> Socrates – We say – it seems to me – that the identity (ταὐτόν) between the one and the many manifested in reasoning (ὑπὸ λόγων) occurs every time in each statement, always, in the past as now. This neither will never end nor begins now, but it is, in my opinion, an everlasting and incorruptible characteristic of our own discourses.
>
> *Phil.* 15d4–8

22 With the exception of the good life in the *Philebus*.

2) The problem of the relation between order and disorder within the framework of the whole cosmos:

> it is better to affirm, as we have often said, that in the all there is much unlimit and sufficient limit (ἄπειρόν τε ἐν τῷ παντὶ πολύ, καὶ πέρας ἱκανόν), and, above them, a Cause of not little power, which, by ordering and regulating years, seasons and months, can be rightly called wisdom and intelligence (σοφία καὶ νοῦς).
>
> *Phil.* 30c3–7

Thanks to his long life, Plato was able to offer readers an extended protreptic path, which also enabled him in the *Theaetetus* to provide the image of midwifery, to illustrate what he – Socrates' pupil – had done by writing philosophy.

References

BASTIANINI, G.; SEDLEY, D. (1995). *Commentarium in Platonis* Theaetetum, in *Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini*, Part III, Commentaries. Olschki. Florence, pp. 227–562.

BRANWOOD, L. (1976). *Compendia: A word index to Plato*. Compendia. Leeds-Manchester.

BURNYEAT, M.F. (1990). *Introduction* to M.J. Levett (trans.), *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*, rev. M. BURNYEAT. Hackett. Indianapolis-Cambridge.

CATTANEI, E.; FERMANI, A.; MIGLIORI, M. (eds.) (2016). *By the Sophists to Aristotle through Plato*. Baden-Baden, Sankt Augustin. Academia Verlag.

CORNFORD, F.M. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge. The* Theaetetus *and the* Sophist *of Plato*, translated with a running commentary. Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD. London.

KAHN, C.H. (1999³). *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue. The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass (Italian transl. by L. Palpacelli: *Platone e il dialogo socratico. L'uso filosofico di una forma letteraria*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2008).

LEDGER, G.-R. (1989). *Re-counting Plato*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

LONG, A.A. (1998). Plato's Apologies and Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, in GENTZLER, J. (ed.). *Method in Ancient Philosophy*. Clarendon Press. Oxford, pp. 113–136.

LUTOSLAWSKI, W. (1897). *The origin and growth of Plato's Logic*. Longmans, Green and Co. London.

MIGLIORI, M. (1999). Gorgia quale sofista di riferimento di Platone. *Giornale di metafisica*, NS 21, pp. 101–126; now in Id. (2019). *La bellezza della complessità. Studi su Platone e dintorni*. Petite Plaisance. Pistoia, pp. 39–66.

MIGLIORI, M. (2000). La filosofia dei sofisti: un pensiero posteleatico. *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e filosofia dell'Università di Macerata*, XXXIII, pp. 9–30; now in Id. (2919). *La bellezza della complessità. Studi su Platone e dintorni.* Petite Plaisance. Pistoia, pp. 67–95.

MIGLIORI, M. (2007). *Plato's Sophist, Value and Limitation on Ontology. Five lessons followed by a discussion with B. Centrone, A. Fermani, L. Palpacelli, D. Quarantotto*, Sankt Augustin. Academia Verlag (Italian transl.: *Il* Sofista *di Platone. Valore e limiti dell'ontologia*. Cinque lezioni e una successiva discussione con Bruno Centrone, Arianna Fermani, Lucia Palpacelli, Diana Quarantotto, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2006, 20182).

MIGLIORI, M. (2013). *Il disordine ordinato. La filosofia dialettica di Platone. 2 vv., I. Dialettica, metafisica e cosmologia; II. Dall'anima alla prassi etica e politica.* Morcelliana. Brescia.

MIGLIORI, M. (2017). *Platone*. La Scuola. Brescia.

MIGLIORI, M. (2020). A Hermeneutic Paradigm for the History of Ancient Philosophy: the Multifocal Approach. *Giornale di Metafisica*, NS 39 (2017), pp. 187–207; now in Id. (2020). *Lifelong Studies in Love WITH PLATO*, Baden-Baden. Academia Verlag, pp. 113–133; Italian version in Id. (2019). *La bellezza della complessità. Studi su Platone e dintorni*. Petite Plaisance. Pistoia, pp. 539–567.

ROBIN, L. (1930). *Platon, Phèdre,* texte établi et traduit par L. Robin, *Œuvres complètes* IV, 3. Les Belles Lettres. Paris.

SEDLEY D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism. Text and Subtext in Plato's* Theaetetus. Oxford. Clarendon Press (Italian transl. by M. Cannarsa (2011). *La levatrice del platonismo. Testo e sottotesto nel* Teeteto *di Platone*. Milano. Vita & Pensiero).

STEFANINI, L. (1949). *Platone*, 2 vv., Padova 1932–1935; new edition: 1949^2, reprinted by Istituto di Filosofia, Università degli Studi di Padova, Padova 1991.

CHAPTER 3

Is Plato's *Theaetetus* an Exercise in Epistemology? A Granite Epitaph Erected Also on the Strength of the *Parmenides*

Vasilis Politis

1

For the literal-minded, it is undeniable that the question posed by Plato in the *Theaetetus*, "What is knowledge (*epistēmē*)?", is a question in epistemology. However, as the idea of epistemology is standardly understood in modern philosophy, and as it is commonly understood among commentators on Plato and the *Theaetetus* for the past decades, indeed for more than a hundred years and at least since Natorp's 1903 classic, epistemology designates a philosophical undertaking that must be distinguished from, and may even be set against, a different undertaking, metaphysics. On this understanding, we are invited to suppose that Plato intends the question in the *Theaetetus*, "What is knowledge?", to be distinguished from, and he may even intend it to be set against, questions in metaphysics; and we are invited to suppose this, even if it is admitted that, in the dialogue, Plato engages in questions in metaphysics in the process of looking for an answer to this epistemological question.

In this paper I set out to demonstrate: *what* this view is, which has dominated the study of the *Theaetetus* for so long; *that* it is thoroughly mistaken; and *that* this issue makes a very great difference to our understanding of the dialogue.

To show that, and why, the epistemological view of the *Theaetetus* is mistaken, I shall rely substantially on the *Parmenides*, taking as my point of departure the passage 132b8–c8 from the first part of the dialogue, and shall pursue this in and through the second part of the dialogue. By relying on the claim made by Plato, without defense, in this passage (*Parmenides* 132b8–c8), and by arguing that this claim is taken up, worked out and defended in the second part of the dialogue, I want to demonstrate that:

For Plato: we cannot consider a *noēma* ("thought", "content of a thought", "aspect of a thought", even "concept") without immediately considering its proper *nooumenon* (object of thought, i.e. the real object, *to on*, at which

the thought is directed and is *of*); indeed, without considering the question whether, and if so how, this *nooumenon* is a single unitary object, a *hen*.

We may refer to this as "Plato's inextricability thesis", the thesis, namely, that thought and reality cannot be disentangled; not even notionally and for the purposes of philosophical investigation. This, if I am not mistaken, spells the immediate demise of the epistemological reading of *Theaetetus*.

It will be necessary to consider whether the inextricability thesis is present not only in the *Parmenides*, but also in the *Theaetetus*; and, if it is, why do those critics fail to recognize this. I argue that Plato expressly asserts and defends the inextricability thesis in *Theaetetus* 184b–187b. He does so when he argues that thought requires certain objects or qualities that are true of all things. He calls them *koina* and includes *oneness* or *the one* (*to hen*) among them. The *koina* include, in addition: being and not-being; similarity and dissimilarity; sameness and difference; number; beauty and ugliness; goodness and badness. Famously, Plato argues here that the *koina* cannot be known through sense-perception, from which he concludes that, since knowledge is a form of thinking, and thinking requires the *koina*, it is not the case that knowledge is sense-perception.

I suggest there are two reasons why the upholders of the epistemological reading of the *Theaetetus* have refused to recognize this. First, they have made out Plato's *koina* to be concepts, rather than objects. Secondly, they (and Cooper especially) have argued that, even though Plato thinks that *some* thought is subject to the *koina* (whether understood as concepts or as objects), he allows that there is also *some* thought, and thought at its most basic and based purely in sense-perception, which does not require the *koina*. I am not alone in thinking that this is wrong. Contra Cooper, Plato's claim is that *all* thought is subject to the *koina* and is not possible without them; from which it follows that *no* thought is based purely in sense-perception. If this is still a point of contention in regard to the *Theaetetus*, the *Parmenides* provides the corrective and confirms the right reading of the *Theaetetus*.

Relying substantially on the *Parmenides*, for the refutation of the epistemological reading of *Theaetetus*, is, I think, proper. First, it is generally accepted, and accepted also by those who uphold the epistemological reading, that the two dialogues are written in close proximity. Indeed, for the upholder of the epistemological reading, both dialogues set to one side, either definitively or provisionally, the theory of Forms, and the associated metaphysics, of *Phaedo* and *Republic*: the *Theaetetus* does so from beginning to end (with the possible exception of the so-called digression at 172c–177c); the *Parmenides* does so after it has, in the first part of the dialogue, subjected the theory of Forms to a series of objections.

Secondly, and as we shall see, the *Parmenides*, after the theory of Forms has been subjected to a series of objections, defends a claim that is central also in the *Theaetetus*: that sense-perception is not sufficient for thinking. The *Parmenides* defends this, in the dialogue's second part, by arguing for the claim that: thinking requires use of a certain object, namely, *the one* (*to hen*), and *the one* is not an object of sense-perception. I note that the same claim is made by Plato in *Republic* VII, 524e–525a.[1] We may also note that the meeting between Socrates and Parmenides is mentioned in *Theaetetus* (183e), which means that, apparently, we have a cross reference from *Theaetetus* to *Parmenides*.

Let me say, by way of clarification and to avert the impression that my target is vague, what I mean by the epistemological reading of the *Theaetetus*. I mean the reading that, first, says that Plato intends the question he poses in *Theaetetus*, "What is knowledge?", to be distinguished from, and that he may even intend it to be set against, questions in metaphysics; and, secondly, spells out this by saying that, in *Theaetetus* 184–187, and in the dialogue generally, Plato is not concerned with the objects of thought, or with how we come to know them, he is only concerned with how the corresponding concepts are used in judgements about sense-perceptible things. Though it can be traced back at least as far as Natorp's 1903 classic, the epistemological reading was introduced by Richard Robinson in 1950, re-launched to much greater effect by John Cooper in 1970, taken up to no lesser effect by Myles Burnyeat in 1976, and so a tradition was formed and still very much alive though much more controversial now than it was for a good while. I believe it is time for its epitaph.

The issue of this paper makes a very great difference to our understanding of Plato's *Theaetetus*. Going back at least to Paul Natorp and the late nineteenth century (see NATORP 1903 and POLITIS 2004), and ever more pronounced since the inception of analytic readings of Plato in the twentieth century, this dialogue has, especially among philosophers and scholars of Plato who think of Plato's philosophy as, not only of historical interest, but also as alive for us today, attracted special attention and interest among Plato's dialogues. This attention and interest has, to a great extent, revolved around the question whether the dialogue indicates a moment in Plato in which he considers setting to one side, either definitively or provisionally, a metaphysics-based approach to philosophy, in favour of an epistemology-based approach. Critics have been arguing on both sides of this question, with little sign of the debate abating.

If the argument of this paper is on the right lines, this debate is based on a false assumption: that the question, "What is knowledge?", as posed and

1 See POLITIS (2021), ch. 7.

pursued in the *Theaetetus*, is an epistemological rather than a metaphysical question. In conclusion to the paper, and for the sake of a more positive and uplifting prospect, I shall submit that the question "What is knowledge?" is, in Plato's hands, as purely metaphysical as any *ti esti* question in Plato. This is because the *ti esti* question is the type of question from which Plato's metaphysics begins and to which it always returns.

2

In a seminal paper of 1950, Richard Robinson wrote:

> it [the *Theaetetus*] turns away from the objective world of Forms to deal with our thinking, our fallibility, and our sensations.
>
> ROBINSON 1950, p. 5

> Plato has here [in the *Theaetetus*] turned his attention away from the world of Forms to the mind of man. And why not? [...] We do not need some metaphysics hinted at behind it all. We are entirely delighted with what is explicit, the keen and full development of the difficulty of defining knowledge.
>
> ROBINSON 1950, p. 18

This is the view I have in mind when I say that the study of the *Theaetetus* has been dominated by the view that we must suppose that Plato intends the question that he poses in *Theaetetus*, "What is knowledge?", to be distinguished from, and that he may even intend it to be set against, questions in metaphysics.

It is true, a swallow does not a summer make, nor is a tradition made by a single paper, especially one written long ago and not often quoted or referenced. A second, and far more effective swallow lent it voice to this view twenty years later (1970), in a paper that keeps being quoted and engaged with time and again up to the present day,[2] when John Cooper (who does not mention Robinson's paper) argued for what I take to be the same view; though Cooper is careful not to make it as explicit and unguarded. I do not want to rely overly on Cooper's revealing statement, at the end of the paper, that: «Plato's conception of empirical knowledge [in the *Theaetetus*] has a definite Kantian

2 Most recently, and yet again, by Gail Fine in her 2017 paper (FINE 2017).

flavor» (144).[3] It is a clear signal of the view that Plato is not here preoccupied with metaphysics: if one likens Plato's *koina* to Kant's concepts of the intellect (*Verstandesbegriffe*), one is directly signaling that their function is epistemological in contradistinction to metaphysical. And I do not at all want to rely on Cooper's claim, contra Cornford's famous view of 1935 (itself carefully criticized by Robinson in the 1950 paper), that we must not suppose that the *koina* ("common things") introduced in *Theaetetus* 184–187 are Platonic Forms.

I have in mind, rather, Cooper's claim that, according to Plato in this passage, sense-perception alone is sufficient for applying, to the data of the individual senses, concepts peculiar to the objects of a single sense. Even more remarkable, and confirming beyond doubt that Robinson's statement of the epistemological reading of the *Theaetetus* represents also Cooper's view, is Cooper's unmistakable view that the *koina* introduced in *Theaetetus* 184–187 are: concepts. It is not only that Cooper routinely refers to the *koina* as 'concepts' (the term "concepts" and its cognates occur 33 times in his paper), as so treats them as concepts; he says: «The higher power of the mind is restricted to the application of only certain concepts, namely the *koina*» (p. 141) The claim that the *koina* are concepts is necessary for a major and central claim that Cooper defends. This claim says that, in *Theaetetus* 184–187, and in the dialogue generally, Plato is not concerned with the objects of thought as such, or with how we come to know them, he is only concerned with how the corresponding concepts are used in judgements about sense-perceptible things.

We need not suppose that the *koina* are Forms, to be seriously worried about the claim, which Cooper makes without defense or pause, that they are concepts. Surely, if there is anything that we may, immediately and without the begging of questions, suppose that the *koina* are, it is that they are objects; that is (in the context of *Theaetetus* 184–187), objects of thought in contradistinction to, purely and simply, contents of thought and concepts in the sense of contents of thought. Why may we suppose this? The term *koina*, like the term *aisthēta*, indicates the object of an object-directed state of mind; and, just as we would not translate *aisthēta* with "contents of the senses" – it is standardly translated as "objects of the senses", "sense-perceptible things" and the like – so

3 There is a remarkable parallel to Burnyeat here (BURNYEAT 1976, pp. 49–50), who likewise invokes Kant. It was my reading of this paper that, in the late 1990s, prompted me to wonder whether no one has pursued the comparison with Kant; not long after which I stumbled on Natorp's classic (in a second-hand bookshop in Berlin), which fascinated me beyond anything and surpassed my wildest expectations; not long after which, again, Professor Dillon suggested Natorp's 600 page long monument might need being translated for the English speaking audience; which eventually led to POLITIS (2004), which I translated together with my friend John Connolly.

too we ought not to translate *koina* with "common concepts" or even (witness the "Kantian flavor") "concepts of the intellect", but ought rather to translate it as "common objects", "common things", or "objects of thought/intellect/reason". Plato nowhere in this passage refers to the *koina* as concepts; and it is not clear what the Greek in Plato's text is for Cooper's "concepts" here.

The refuge in "concepts", for the *koina* of the *Theaetetus*, is crucial to the epistemological reading, for what this reading urges is that we turn our back on the traditional view, represented by Cornford, which says that the hypothesis under examination in the dialogue – that *epistēmē* (knowledge) is *aisthēsis* ([sense-]perception) – is dismissed by Plato on the grounds that knowledge requires *noēta*, that is, objects of the intellect and not of sense-perception, and, in particular, the *koina*. Cooper's translation (if this is the right word for it) of them as "concepts" is what allows him to turn his back on this traditional view, and what enables him to salvage Plato's project in the dialogue as epistemological in contradistinction to metaphysical.

When, not long after, a third and no less effective critic joined the chorus, when Burnyeat joined in in 1976, the tradition was fully formed and attracting many advocates.[4] If Cooper was more guarded than Robinson, Burnyeat was more guarded than Cooper. Unlike Cooper, Burnyeat does not refer to the *koina* as "concepts", but as "features". And, unlike Cooper, he argues that, in Plato's argument, *all* thought relies on the *koina*, which are not perceptible by the senses; this is true of even the most basic thoughts, in which the thinker does no more than recognize as being (e.g.) red or soft something that she is (e.g.) seeing or touching in front of her. According to Burnyeat, Plato defends this by arguing that it is precisely what is required to ensure that the judging subject is a single, unified consciousness and avoid that it fragments into so many judging sub-subjects, each inhabiting a sense organ and identical with a single sense modality such as sight or touch.

For all its subtlety and cautiousness, Burnyeat's reading of the *Theaetetus*, based, like Cooper's, on a reading of 184–187, is an exemplary example of casting the dialogue as epistemology in contradistinction to metaphysics. Burnyeat scoffs at the suggestion that the *koina*, and *being* as central among them, might, for Plato in this argument, be objects in their own right;[5] instead, he conceives of them as, purely, "aspects" (49) of judgements, indeed as "abstracted from"

4 For additional references to exponents of this tradition, see CHAPPELL (2004), pp. 16–21.

5 «No defence is offered of the idea that knowledge, let alone truth, presupposes a grasp of being in the specific sense of existence, reality or essence, and if any such narrow notion of being were intended, the argument would be left to limp on an unargued assumption of the first magnitude. That is not Plato's manner in this dialogue.» (BURNYEAT 1976, p. 45).

judgements.[6] He might as well have called them concepts, since this is what a concept is: something abstracted from thought and judgement. On Burnyeat's account, Plato's account of knowledge, much like any empiricist, or causal realist, account but with a Kantian twist, is made up of the following elements: (1) the objects «"out there" in [one's] environment» (50);[7] (2) the ways in which these objects causally affect our sense organs; and (3) the judgements that the mind or subject makes about these objects, and does so as a unified consciousness.[8]

Once we recognize that the *koina* of *Theaetetus* 184–187 are objects of thought and of the intellect, not concepts, we cannot agree with Cooper's or Burnyeat's view that Plato is not concerned with the objects of thought as such, or with how we come to know them, he is only concerned with how the corresponding concepts are used in judgements about sense-perceptible things. What is plain, rather, is that Plato is concerned with both. The significance of all this is manifest. For, if what I have been arguing is on the right lines, there is no room for thinking, with Robinson, Cooper, Burnyeat and the tradition they inaugurated, that, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato turns his attention away from the world to our mind and to thinking. To be sure, he is, in the dialogue, concerned with our thinking and our mind; but not in contradistinction to the world-not even notionally and for the purposes of philosophical investigation.

3

We may wonder whether Plato would ever have thought, even for a moment, that it is possible to investigate thinking and our mind without, in so doing, investigating being and the objects of thought. We may also note that whereas it will be hard to find a term in Plato corresponding to our "concept" – with the possible exception of *noēma* at *Parmenides* 132b8 (more on which momentarily) – it is not hard to find the term he uses for what a thought is *of*,

6 «If, on the other hand, the notion of being at work in the final argument is the quite general one which *abstracts from* the 'is' in propositions of the form '*x* is *F*', then in appealing to the point that a grasp of being is a necessary condition for attaining truth or knowledge Socrates is bringing to bear an agreement which has governed the discussion since 152 c.» (BURNYEAT 1976, p. 45; emphasis on «abstracts on» added by me.)

7 Such as «a colour and a sound»; which, Burnyeat says, «each has being *in its own right*» (p. 44, emphasis added). See also p. 46 (emphasis added): «a colour and a sound will have *its own definite nature*».

8 The idea that Plato's *Theaetetus* marks the introduction into philosophy of the idea of the unity of consciousness, and that the dialogue links this idea to the idea of objective judgement, is the guiding thread in Burnyeat's paper.

the object of thought: *nooumenon*. Indeed, even if we are tempted to translate *noēma*, at *Parmenides* 132b8, with "concept", on the grounds that it is used for, precisely, a content of a thought, the point of that passage is that we cannot consider a *noēma* without immediately considering its proper *nooumenon*; indeed, without considering the question whether, and if so how, its proper *nooumenon* is a single unitary object, a *hen*. This is why it is problematical to translate *noēma* as "concept" here: to the modern reader, it is hard to read "concept" and not hear "content of thought" *in contradistinction to* "object of thought"; but there is no such contradistinction in Plato, either on the philosophical level or, if my hearing is not amiss, on the verbal level.

Parmenides 132b8–c8 is a central passage for all this, when Plato poses the question of the relation between thinking and being, and when he anticipates, and closes off, the danger that thinking should become isolated from being. This danger is considered, and closed off, when, in quick succession, Parmenides states that: it is not possible that a thought should be of nothing (*oudenos*); it is necessary that a thought should be of something (*tinos*), and of something that is ([*tinos*] *ontos*), and of something that is one (*henos tinos*) and involves some one quality (*mian tina idean*). A Form (*eidos*), he says, is that which is thought of as being one thing, always the same in all cases: ***touto to nooumenon*** *hen einai, aei on to auto epi pasin*. What Parmenides says here is a response to Socrates' proposal, when Socrates proposes to safeguard the unity of each Form by supposing that each Form is a unitary thought of a plurality of things. Parmenides' response is to say that this is not a possible way of safeguarding the unity of each of those beings, Forms, because, on the contrary, the unity of a thought depends (either exclusively or in important part; the passage appears to leave this open) on the unity of the beings *of* which it is the thought – the objects of thought.

This passage is, of course, much contested, one major issue being whether Plato's argument in it is intended to show that Forms are mind-independent. Burnyeat (1982) notoriously argues that it is so intended, but Allen (1997, p. 174) strikes a cautionary note: «Nothing in the mere observation that thought is of something which is and is one over many requires the conclusion that what is thought exists independently of the thinking of it». Irrespective of what stand we take on this delicate issue, the one point made loud and clear in the passage, which is not a delicate point but ought to be wholly unmistakable, is that we cannot consider a *noēma* without immediately considering its proper *nooumenon*; indeed, without considering the question whether and if so how its proper *nooumenon* is a single unitary object, a *hen*.

I realize that one may push back, in the name of urging that this is just what Plato does in *Theaetetus*: he investigates, for long stretches of a dialogue,

noēmata, without investigating their proper *nooumena*. For, one may urge that the *Parmenides* passage, to which I have been appealing and which is between the young Socrates and the old Parmenides, is part of a controversy. This is the controversy over the question, first, whether the supposition that there are Forms, and that Forms can be known by us, is at all tenable, since, as Parmenides spells out at length, it is subject to many objections; and, secondly, whether, and irrespective of these objections, there is positive reason to believe that there are Forms and that we can know them. It may be urged that, because of this setting, this passage cannot be relied on unduly.

This pushback strategy is not convincing, it seems to me. It is true that the *Parmenides* passage is part of the controversy about Forms, but it is the old Parmenides who argues, against the young Socrates, that we cannot consider a *noēma* without immediately considering its proper *nooumenon*; indeed, without considering the question whether, and if so how, its proper *nooumenon* is a single unitary object, a *hen*. Furthermore, this point, coming from a crux passage in the first part of the *Parmenides*, remains very much alive in the second part of the dialogue; and, on any reading of the dialogue, and irrespective of what stand we take on the vexed question of the relation between its first part (up to 135) and its second part (from 135, and especially from 142), it is evident that the second part is aimed, somehow though it may not be clear how, at overcoming this controversy.

4

Critics have not generally recognised that this point from a crux passage in the first part of *Parmenides* (132b8–c8) – that we cannot consider a *noēma* without immediately considering its proper *nooumenon*; indeed, without considering the question whether, and if so how, its proper *nooumenon* is a single unitary object, a *hen* – is present just as much in the second part of the dialogue. I believe that this point from the first part of the dialogue is taken up, worked out, and defended, in the second part. Let me, therefore, in the best part of the remainder of the paper, attend to demonstrating this. One reason why the point – made in 132b8–c8 and taken up, worked out, and defended in the second part of the dialogue – is so important is that it spells the immediate demise of the epistemological reading of the *Theaetetus*. To recall, I mean the reading that, first, says that Plato intends the question that he poses in *Theaetetus*, 'What is knowledge?', to be distinguished from, and that he may even intend it to be set against, questions in metaphysics; and, secondly, spells out this by saying that, in *Theaetetus* 184–187, and in the dialogue generally,

Plato is not concerned with the objects of thought as such, or with how we come to know them, he is only concerned with how the corresponding concepts are used in judgements about sense-perceptible things.

The First Hypothesis in the second part of *Parmenides* concludes with the claim that, if *the one* (*to hen*, understood as the original source of all unity and unitary things) is understood in a certain way, then it is not a possible object of naming, speaking, judging, perceiving, giving an account (142a2–8); in short, it is totally outside thought. The Second Hypothesis concludes with the claim that, if *the one* is understood in a certain different way, then it is manifestly an object of knowledge, judgement, perception, naming and having an account (155d6–e1) – the very things the ending of the first investigation denied of *the one*.[9]

Even setting aside the question whether *the one* here is the Form of *the one*, and even setting aside the question *what* the relation is between *the one* and thinking, we could hardly have wished for a more emphatic indication that Plato intends the second part of the dialogue to pick up on the claim, from the first part and 132b8–c8 in particular, that we cannot consider a *noēma* without immediately considering its proper *nooumenon*; indeed, without considering the question whether and if so how its proper *nooumenon* is a single unitary object, a *hen*.

The first consequence of The First Hypothesis infers from the hypothesis which says that *the one* is one, that all it is is one and that it does not have any kind of multiplicity (see *ei hen esti, allo ti ouk an eiē polla to hen*, 137c4–5).[10] From this crucial, initial consequence a host of other consequences are inferred. They are typically of the form "*the one* is neither F nor contrary-to-F", where F is a quality that, in one way or another, presupposes that that which has this quality, F, is or implies a multiplicity; such as, most especially, if F is the quality of being a whole and contrary-to-F is the quality of having parts.

Practically all the consequences of this first investigation make no reference to thinking, but the last few do, when it is inferred that it is not possible for *the one* to be named, or spoken of, or judged, or known, or perceived, or given an account (142a). This conclusion, it appears, serves to identify and defend a necessary condition for thought; namely, that (The First Condition of Thought):

9 I do not mean to imply that, if *the one* is understood in different ways in the two Hypotheses, two *ones* are in question.

10 I shall not consider why, or because of what (hidden) supposition, this might be thought to be a plausible inference. Perhaps this is because of the (hidden) supposition that what a thing is, it is, purely and simply, in relation to itself.

Thought is of something that is.

For it is from the consequence that *the one* is not something that is, and hence that it is not a being that is one (141e9–11), that it is inferred that it is not possible for something to belong to *the one* (142a1–2); from which, in turn, it is inferred that it, *the one*, is not a possible object of naming, speaking, judging, perceiving, giving an account (142a2–8).[11]

It is notable that not only modes of thought are mentioned (judging, knowing, giving an account), and likewise of speech (naming, speaking of), but also perception, *aisthēsis*. We may suggest that Plato here considers *aisthēsis* as a thought-involving kind of sensory perception, and this is why *aisthēsis* is grouped together with modes of thought, or thought and speech. When I speak of thought in what follows, I include *aisthēsis*, understood as a thought-involving kind of sensory perception. We shall see that, towards the end of the dialogue, Plato uses not *aisthanesthai*, but *phainesthai* for the idea of a sensory perception that is not thought-involving.

This first consequence, from which all the other consequences are inferred, is based on the first investigation of the consequences for *the one*, on the hypothesis that it is only in relation to itself and not in relation to other things. It is apparent, therefore, that the conclusion that it is not possible for *the one* to be named, or spoken of, or judged, or known, or given an account, or perceived, serves to identify and defend a further necessary condition for thought; namely, that (The Second Condition of Thought):

Thought requires complexity in the object of thought;
and such complexity requires at least two things standing in relation to each other, namely, the relation X belongs to Y.

It is because *the one*, if supposed to be only by itself and only in relation to itself, does not meet this condition that it is not even an object of thought. The character of this complexity is indicated at 142a1–2, when it is said that it is not possible for something (*ti*) to belong to what is not; and the unthinkability of *the one* is based on this statement. This shows that the complexity in the object of thought is here characterised as being of the form: X belongs to Y (I use "X

11 The claim that *the one* is not even a being is inferred from the claim that it does not partake of time in any way (141e3–7). Some critics think this inference is clearly fallacious, and intended as fallacious. I don't think it is clearly fallacious, and there is no indication that it is intended as fallacious.

belongs to Y" for Plato's 'X *esti tō*[*i*] Y'; he has also been using, and will go on to use, "Y partakes of X" for "X belongs to Y").

It is remarkable that this passage (142a1–8) picks up on what Parmenides had already said in the first part of the dialogue, when, at 132b8–c8, he said that it is not possible that a thought should be of nothing (*oudenos*), rather, a thought is necessarily of something (*tinos*) and of something that is ([*tinos*] *ontos*). But the present passage substantially spells out what was merely stated there. In particular, it spells out why we can validly move from "Thinking is of something" to "Thinking is of something that is". This is a legitimate move, because thinking of something, X, implies thinking of two things, X and Y, and implies thinking that Y belongs to X; and because it is possible for Y to belong to X, only if X is (see *ho de mē esti, toutō*[*i*] *tō*[*i*] *mē onti eiē an ti auto*[*i*] *ē autou;*, «Would something belong to, or be of, that which is not, the very thing that is not?», 142a1–2). I note that whereas originally (at 132b8–c8) Parmenides had added that thought is necessarily of some *one* thing that is, this point is not yet touched on in the second part of the dialogue. It will, we shall see, be taken up later.

Where in the second part of the dialogue, if anywhere, is it argued that *the one*, and, in particular, *the one* conceived as a Form, is necessary for thought? (I note, but put aside for the present paper, that, famously, at 135ab, Plato has Socrates say that Forms, and the defining or marking off of Forms, is necessary for thought.) So far, thought has been mentioned at three places: the end of the first investigation (142a); the mention, at 143a7–9, of *the one* taken only by itself *in thought* (*tē*[*i*] *dianoia*[*i*]); and the end of the second investigation (155d–e). The next occasion in which thought is mentioned is during the fourth investigation, which is addressed to the question of what happens to the things other than *the one*, if it is supposed that *the one* is (157b6–160b4). The reference to thinking is at 158c2–d8, when it is argued that, if we were to take away *in thought* (*tē*[*i*] *dianoia*[*i*], 158c2) the supposition that a whole and any of its parts, or the parts of those parts, partake in *the one*, we will be left not with determinate or limited (*peras echon*) wholes and parts, but simply with indeterminate multiplicity (*apeiria, apeiria to plēthos*). This points to the opposite of what happened earlier, when it was supposed that *the one* is only by itself and not in relation to other things: here it is the things other than *the one* that are supposed to be only by themselves and not in relation to *the one*, whereas there it was *the one* that was supposed to be only by itself and not in relation to other things.

The question is whether Plato thinks the argument is parallel in regard to the possibility of thought being *of* something: Does he think that, just as *the one*, if supposed to be only by itself, is not a possible object of thought, so too

the things other than *the one*, if supposed to be only by themselves, are not a possible object of thought? It is the question whether Plato anywhere in the second part of the dialogue argues that that which is simply indeterminate multiplicity is not a possible object of thought. Originally and in the first part of the dialogue (132b8–c8), Parmenides had claimed that thought must be not only of something and of something that is, but also of something that is one. It follows that that which is simply indeterminate multiplicity, since it does not partake of *the one* and is not one in any way, is not a possible object of thought. The question is whether here, in the second part of the dialogue, this claim is defended, or spelled out further, which originally was only asserted.

The last two investigations in the *Parmenides* consider the consequences of the supposition that *the one* is not: the penultimate investigation considers the consequences for the many in relation to themselves (164b5–165e1); the ultimate investigation considers the consequences for the many in relation to *the one* (165e2–166c5). Even on a first acquaintance with these two final investigations, one cannot fail to be struck by the impression that they are just as much about thinking as about being, and they are concerned with the consequences for thinking of the supposition that *the one* is not. In the absence of *the one*, the beings in these investigations are characterised as, purely and simply, relational multiplicities making up indeterminate magnitudes. The lesson in regard to thinking, spelled out especially in the penultimate investigation, is that, if *the one* is not, thinking will be 'like a dream during sleep' (*hōsper onar en hupnō*[*i*], 164d2); the kind of dream – more like a nightmare – in which any time one tries to focus one's attention on one such multiplicity, or some one aspect or relation of it, the object of thought will appear to change beyond recognition and break up in front of one's eyes. That Plato's concern is with the consequences *for thinking* is clear from the reference, twice, to what happens in this scenario if one tries to grasp «in thought» (*tē*[*i*] *dianoia*[*i*]) something as being some one thing. It is likewise spelled out what will happen to thought if, rather than trying to focus on some one thing in this scenario, one simply attends to the radical indeterminacy that is characteristic, in this scenario, of being: the object of thought will amount to a thoroughgoing illusion (*phantasma*, 165a5; also 166a5); that is, the kind of thing that, any time it appears or seems to have a certain quality, it merely appears and seems so, without really being so.

The penultimate investigation, in which are spelled out these consequences, *for thinking*, of the supposition that *the one* is not, comes close to saying that, if *the one* is not, thinking will not be possible. But Plato stops short of making this statement: he does not say, here or in the ultimate investigation, that if *the one* is not, thinking will not be possible. What he does, in the ultimate

investigation, is spell out, yet again and even more pointedly, just how exceedingly limited and etiolated is the thinking (if this is the right word for it) that, according to the penultimate investigation, is reduced to momentary appearing and seeming:

> And indeed, they [i.e. the objects of thought in this scenario] are neither the same nor different, neither in contact nor separate, nor anything else that they appeared to be in the argument we went through before [i.e. the penultimate argument they have just been through]. The others neither are nor appear to be any of those things, if one is not.
>
> *Parm.* 166b4–7; trans. GILL & RYAN

It is hard to think of a more suitable statement for a philosopher to make in trying to make manifest that thinking is not possible under a certain supposition, even if, as it appears, the philosopher does not want to conclude with the statement "Under this supposition and in this scenario, thinking is not possible". I am inclined to think that, if Plato does not conclude with this statement, it is not because he thinks that a last refuge might have been afforded one who thinks that it is possible to think even without *the one*. Rather, if the philosopher is wary of going further, it is because he is sensitive to the risk that such a statement, if intended as the conclusion of a strict demonstration and as going further than summing up just how etiolated and reduced thinking (if this is the right name for it) in this scenario has been shown to be, will appear to be the conclusion of an incoherent task: to demonstrate that one cannot think without *the one*, by asking one to do just that: to think without the one.

Is it ruled out, anywhere in the second part of *Parmenides*, that *the one* itself can be perceived by the senses? Or, what amounts to the same, is it ruled out that that which oneness or unity is, its essence, can be determined (specified, defined) by pointing to something that, to the senses, is conspicuously one and unitary?[12] Perhaps Plato could have made things easier for us, if he had considered more explicitly, in the second part of the dialogue, whether or not *the one* itself can be perceived by the senses. It is of considerable assistance that, in this investigation he should preface the second part with the explication that the thing supposed to be, or not to be, is something one might especially grasp by thinking and might consider to be a Form (135e3–4). At the same time, one who is sceptical about the existence and knowability of Forms, such as

12 For the view that these two things amount to the same, see POLITIS (2018), and POLITIS (2021), Chapter 2.

the sceptic mentioned by Parmenides at 134e9–135b2 (and at 133b4–c1), will want to know why we may not suppose that what oneness or unity is can be perceived by the senses. It is useful to recall here a notable passage from the *Republic*, in which it is claimed (by Glaucon) that what oneness or unity is cannot be perceived by the senses, because anything we perceive as one, we no less perceive as indefinitely many.[13] At the same time, this passage is only of limited assistance to us here, because Glaucon's claim cries out to be spelled out and defended, especially if it is to answer one who is prepared to believe that essences exist and can be known to us, provided that he is satisfied that they *can* be perceived by the senses and this is how we know them. In the *Republic* passage, nothing further is said in defence of this crucial claim, and our question is if the second part of the *Parmenides* does better.

There is a passage in the second part of the *Parmenides* that indicates that, and why, that which oneness or unity is cannot be perceived by the senses. The penultimate investigation (164b5–165e1) considers what happens to the many in relation to themselves, and to the thought of them, if *the one* is not; that is, if *the one* conceived as an object of thought is not. Perception, *aisthēsis*, is not mentioned; perhaps this is because, as we saw, *aisthēsis* has been used for a thought-involving kind of perception. But appearing, *phainesthai*, is mentioned repeatedly; and, as we have seen, it is spelled out just how exceedingly limited this appearing will be, and how extremely disjointed its object will be. We may suppose that appearing here is, or includes, sensory appearing.

It is a good question whether the investigation that Plato provides here is adequate for arguing against one who insists that what oneness or unity is can be perceived by the senses, that is, insists that it can be determined (specified, defined) what oneness or unity is by pointing to something conspicuously unitary to the senses. This person is asked, by Plato in this investigation, to imagine what the objects of sensory appearing, and sensory appearing itself, would be like, if there was no such thing, either for being or for thinking, as *the one* itself and *the one* as an object of thought. If he agrees that this is the only or the best way of investigating whether what oneness or unity is can be perceived by the senses, this may well be adequate for persuading him. But why does Plato think that the only or the best way of investigating whether what oneness or unity is can be perceived by the senses, is to imagine what the objects of sensory appearing, and sensory appearing itself, would be like if there was no such thing, either for being or for thinking, as *the one* itself and *the one* as

13 *Resp.* VII, 525a. At 524e this one is introduced in and through the question «What is this one itself?» (*ti pote estin auto to hen*).

an object of thought? Is this not to stack the cards against the view that what oneness or unity is can be perceived by the senses? For, it seems, the proponent of this view may insist that a different, and more fair, way of testing the view would be to imagine a scenario in which one is perceiving by the senses, such as sight, something conspicuously unitary, such as a snow-crystal on a window pane (as in Hans Christian Andersen's tale) or a schematic crystal on a computer screen; and to consider whether this conspicuously unitary object of the senses can serve as an example and exemplar, and hence as a standard (*paradeigma*), of what oneness or unity is.

It seems to me that Plato has a point in not conducting the test, of the view that what oneness or unity is can be perceived by the senses, in this way, and in proposing, rather, the very different way that he proposes. The problem with this other, and seemingly more fair, way of conducting the test, is that it makes it hard to tell whether, when we perceive (e.g.) the snow-crystal as perfectly unitary, or sufficiently unitary to be capable of serving as an example and exemplar, and as a standard, of oneness or unity, we are, strictly, using sense-perception alone, and this is how we recognise the snow-crystal as unitary, or, on the contrary, it is only because sense-perception here is combined with thought that we can recognise this. Plato's alternative way of conducting the test is, I suggest, due to this problem, and it serves to obviate it.

We may conclude that, late in the second part of the *Parmenides*, Plato identifies and defends a further necessary condition for thought, in addition to the two conditions he identified and defended earlier in the second part (The Third Condition of Thought):

> Thought is of something that is one;
> and thought can be of something that is one, only if
> i. there is something that oneness or unity is, its essence, and
> ii. this essence cannot be perceived by the senses (it is, in this sense, a Form).

We may recall the two conditions of thought that he identified and defended earlier in the second part: (The First Condition of Thought) *Thought is of something that is*; and (The Second Condition of Thought) *Thought requires complexity in the object of thought, and such complexity requires at least two things standing in relation to each other, namely, the relation* X belongs to Y. It is remarkable that these three general conditions for thought are anticipated in the first part of the dialogue – at 132b8–c8 (also at 135b5–c7) – but while *there* it was simply stated that thought is subject to these conditions, in the second part the conditions are spelled out and defended.

5

We may conclude that a major task that Plato sets himself in *Parmenides* is to demonstrate the claim, made at 132b8–c8 and defended in a number of places in the second part of the dialogue, that:

> we cannot consider a *noēma* ("thought", "content of a thought", "aspect of a thought", even "concept") without immediately considering its proper *nooumenon* (object of thought, i.e. the real object, *to on*, at which the thought is directed and is *of*); indeed, without considering the question whether, and if so how, this *nooumenon* is a single unitary object, a *hen*.

This claim (I began by referring to it as the inextricability thesis) spells the immediate demise of the epistemological reading of the *Theaetetus*. This is the reading that, first, says that Plato intends the question that he poses in *Theaetetus*, "What is knowledge?", to be distinguished from, and that he may even intend it to be set against, questions in metaphysics; and, further, spells out this by saying that, in *Theaetetus* 184–187, and in the dialogue generally, Plato is not concerned with the objects of thought as such, or with how we come to know them, he is only concerned with how the corresponding concepts are used in judgements about sense-perceptible things.

We are left with the important issue of the relation between the two dialogues, *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus*, in this regard: Is the result we have arrived at on the basis of the *Parmenides* consistent with and consonant with the argument in *Theaetetus* 184–187? Does it support a reading of the *Theaetetus* passage that takes the *koina* to be objects of the intellect or reason and resists the idea that they are concepts (Cooper) or, what amounts to the same, that they are "abstracted from" judgements (Burnyeat)?[14]

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is whether we should suppose, as Burnyeat does, that, for Plato in the *Theaetetus* argument, (Option 1) «the inability of perception to grasp being stems from [i.e. is because of] an inability [of perception] to frame even the simplest proposition of the form '*x* is *F*'».[15] Or, on the contrary, we should suppose that, for Plato in this argument, (Option 2) the inability of perception to frame even the simplest proposition is because of its inability to grasp being. How we answer this Euthyphro-style dilemma makes all the difference. If we go for Option 1, we cannot suppose

---

14 See note 6 above.

15 BURNYEAT (1976), p. 49.

that the *koina* are objects, that is, objects in their own right, and we will be invited to think of them as abstracted from judgements (as does Burnyeat); and so, in effect, as concepts (as in Cooper's view). On the other hand, if we go for Option 2, we may, I suspect we must, suppose that the *koina* are objects in their own right; objects of the intellect or reason as opposed to objects of the senses.

What the extended excursion into the *Parmenides* has shown (among other things) is that, in that dialogue, Plato defends Option 2. To recognize this, we may recall the conditions of thought that Plato argues for in the second part of the *Parmenides*, and recall how he articulates them (we summarized them at the end of the previous section). Central among these conditions is not only that *Thought is of something that is* and that *Thought requires complexity in the object of thought*, but also that *such complexity requires at least two things standing in relation to each other, namely, the relation* X belongs to Y. This tells against Option 1 and in favour of Option 2. For it shows that, for Plato, a judgement is a combination and compound of two objects, X and Y, rather than these components, X and Y, being abstracted from the judgement. We may directly infer that the *koina* are objects in their own right, not something abstracted from judgement; at any rate we may infer this, if we suppose that the *koinon* in the *Parmenides*, namely, *the one* or *oneness*, is among the objects involved in all judgement and out of which judgement is composed. This supposition is provided for by The Third Condition of Thought (see end of last section).

That there should not be doubt about this conclusion, is apparent also from *Parmenides* 132b8–c8, which prepares for and anticipates the conditions of thought that, as we have seen, are spelled out further, and defended, in the second part of the dialogue. For there it was said that thought requires an object to be *of*, a *noumenon* and object of thought, not simply a *noēma* or thought-content; and that the object of thought must be something that *is* and *is one*. Thought, on this view, is understood as the soul's reaching out for and grasping real and unitary objects, and (as we see in the second part of the dialogue) judgement consists in combining such objects into the distinctive combination that is a judgement.

What about Theaetetus 184–187, in this regard? I confess I do not know on what textual grounds Burnyeat is confident of Option 1; and he does not consider Option 2. He urges that, on Plato's argument in this passage, judgement is a function of the soul, not of the senses. But this point, with which no reading will disagree, is neutral between Option 1 and Option 2. As far as I can see, Plato on the whole leaves open, in *Theaetetus* 184–187, whether he wants to adopt Option 1 or Option 2. At the same time, he points in the direction of Option 2, when he twice says that the soul «inspects» (*episkopein*) the *koina*

«itself through itself» (*autē dia hautēs*, 185d8–e2 & e6–7) and when he reformulates this and says that the soul «reaches out for» (*eporegetai*) the *koina* «by itself» (*kath' hautēn*, 186a4–5). This indicates that judgement is understood as the soul's reaching out for and grasping objects, including, most especially, the *koina*, and combining them into the distinctive combination that is a judgement.

I would like to suggest that, if Plato leaves open, in *Theaetetus* 184–187, whether he wants to adopt Option 1 or Option 2, this is deliberate, and that it is indicated at 185d6–e9, when, in a rhetorically exaggerated manner, Socrates thanks Theaetetus for having 'saved me a vast amount of talk if it seems to you that, while the soul considers some things through the bodily powers, there are others which it considers alone and through itself. This was what I thought myself, but I wanted you to think it too' (185e5–9). This sounds like Plato's indicating that he wants to leave for another occasion how judgement, as a function of the soul, is to be understood; all he wants to argue here (in the argument of *Theaetetus* 184–187) is that judgement is a function of the soul and not of the senses. To consider how judgement, as a function of the soul, is to be understood, the question between Option 1 and Option 2 will have to be taken up. I have argued that it is taken up in the second part of the *Parmenides*, and prepared for and anticipated in the first part (132b8–c8); and it is answered in favour of Option 2. I hope it is not too much to suggest that, when (at *Theaetetus* 185e5–6) Plato implies that a great deal would have to be said on the issue of judgement as a function of the soul, this may be understood as a promise, and one that he will keep, in the *Parmenides*, as we have seen.

6

In what sense and in what way is the question posed by Plato in *Theaetetus* – "What is knowledge (*epistēmē*)?" – a question in metaphysics and not in epistemology or, at any rate, not in epistemology in contradistinction to metaphysics? My response is quite simple. The question "What is knowledge?" is, in Plato's hands, as squarely metaphysical as any *ti esti* question in Plato, this being the type of question from which his metaphysics begins and to which it always returns. This idea of metaphysics – the idea which says that a philosophical inquiry is metaphysical, if it is motivated by the *ti esti* question and the search for an essence; an essence, in the sense of that which is designated by the adequate and true answer to a *ti esti* question – is not common today, but there are those who uphold it, such as, most especially, Kit Fine (see e.g. FINE 1994).

It may be said, in response to my appeal to this, the essence-based idea of metaphysics, that it leaves open whether Plato distinguishes the question "What is knowledge?" from metaphysical questions properly understood, that is, as being concerned, not with the nature of knowledge, but with the nature of reality. This response fails, for two important reasons. First, for Plato, all metaphysics, including the enquiry into the nature of reality, is rooted in the *ti esti* question; and there is no distinction in Plato between these two senses, or types, of metaphysics: the metaphysics that is concerned with the nature of reality and the metaphysics that is rooted in *ti esti* questions.

Secondly, even if we, rather than Plato, introduce this distinction between two senses, or types, of metaphysics, and do this for the sake of a better understanding of Plato, we must recognize that Plato thinks that knowledge is part of reality; as is, he thinks, every other item of which we can properly ask, and search for an answer to, the *ti esti* question. I do not mean that Plato thinks that knowledge is part of reality in a suitably extended sense of "X is real"; I mean, on the contrary, that he thinks that knowledge is part of reality in the fullest sense of "X is real": part of *to ontōs on* («real being»), *to alēthinōs on* («true being»), *to pantelōs on* («perfect being»). For Plato, a crucial mark of whether an item, X, is, in the fullest sense, real or not, is whether or not it is possible properly to ask, and search for an answer to, the *ti esti* question in regard to this item, X. On this mark of reality, knowledge is as real as it gets.

I can imagine the following pushback strategy – may it, and my response to it, mark the conclusion of this paper. For it may be said that, even if Plato's metaphysics is rooted in the *ti esti* question, the question of interest to us when we study the *Theaetetus* is not why in this dialogue Plato raises yet another *ti esti* question, but why he raises just this *ti esti* question, "What is knowledge (*epistēmē*)?" And the answer, surely, it will be said, is that Plato raises just this *ti esti* question, "What is knowledge (*epistēmē*)?", in the *Theaetetus*, because, after so much metaphysics in *Phaedo, Republic* and (the first part of) *Parmenides*, his interests have moved away from metaphysics and towards epistemology.

This, I submit, is pure invention. It is also questionable as philosophy, because it takes it that a genuine philosopher's motivation for taking up this, that, or the other philosophical undertaking is something we can understand in a textbook manner: by supposing that she took up this undertaking because of her interest in this, that, or the other division in the subject, philosophy, and its principal divisions: epistemology, metaphysics, logic, semantics, ethics, aesthetics, etc. How can we do better? By recognizing that, characteristically and typically, when Plato raises a particular *ti esti* question, he does this, not because of his interest in metaphysics, or epistemology, or some other division of the subject, but because of some particular *aporia* (typically capable of

being articulated in the form of a whether-or-not question, or a whether p or q question where p and q look incompatible) and because he thinks that it is necessary to raise a particular *ti esti* question in order to resolve, and indeed to search for a resolution of, the *aporia*. (I have argued for this point in Part II of my *The Structure of Enquiry in Plato's Early Dialogues*.[16]) Therefore, to do better, we must look, in the *Theaetetus* and in other dialogues, for that particular *aporia*, or those particular *aporiai*, that, Plato thinks, requires of us, if we want to resolve it or them and work towards a resolution, that we raise just this *ti esti* question: "What is knowledge (*epistēmē*)?".

References

ALLEN, R.E. (1997). *Plato's Parmenides*. Yale University Press. New Haven.

BURNYEAT, M.F. (1976). Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving. *The Classical Quarterly*, 26 (1), pp. 29–51.

BURNYEAT, M.F. (1982). Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed. *The Philosophical Review*, 91 (1), pp. 3–40.

CHAPPELL, T. (2004). *Reading Plato's Theaetetus*. Sankt Augustin. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

COOPER, J.M. (1970). Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge: *Theaetetus* 184–187. *Phronesis*, 15, pp. 123–146.

CORNFORD, F.M. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: The Theaetetus and Sophist of Plato*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. London.

FINE, G. (2017). Plato on the grades of perception: *Theaetetus* 184–186 and the *Phaedo*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 53, pp. 65–109.

FINE, K. (1994). Essence and Modality. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8, Logic and Language, pp. 1–16.

NATORP, P. (1903). *Platos Ideenlehre. Eine Einführung in den Idealismus*. Dürr. Leipzig.

POLITIS, V. (2004). *Paul Natorp. Plato's Theory of Ideas. An Introduction to Idealism*. (Sankt Augustin. *International Plato Studies, Vol. 18*. Edited with an introduction by Vasilis Politis Translation by Vasilis Politis and John Connolly. Postscript by André Laks).

POLITIS, V. (2012). What is behind the *ti esti* question?. In FINK, J. (ed.). *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass., pp. 232–260.

POLITIS, V. (2015). *The Structure of Enquiry in Plato Early Dialogues*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass.

16 See also POLITIS 2012.

POLITIS, V. (2018). Plato's Geach Talks to Socrates: Definition by Example-and-Exemplar in the *Hippias Major*. *Phronesis*, 63, pp. 218–228.

POLITIS, V. (2021) *Plato's Essentialism. Reinterpreting the Theory of Forms*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass.

ROBINSON, R. (1950). Forms and Error in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Philosophical Review*, 59, pp. 3–30.

CHAPTER 4

Republics of Conversation: The Normativity of Talk in Plato up to the *Theaetetus*

Sophie-Grace Chappell

> Primitiveness and civilisation are degrees of the same thing. If civilisation has an opposite, it is war.
>
> LE GUIN (1969), p. 52

•••

> The opposite of war is conversation.
>
> SCHAMA (2017), p. 312

•••

> Do not be unjust in your questioning, Socrates.
>
> "Protagoras", at PLATO, *Theaetetus* 167d

1

I begin, as you do, with two jokes from Plutarch's *Apophthegmata Laconica*.[1] The scene is the Peloponnese in 338 BC. Philip of Macedon, having just won the Battle of Chaeronea, is advancing towards the territory of the Spartans. He sends ahead messages:

> PHILIP OF MACEDON: Shall I enter your city as a friend, or as a foe?
> SPARTANS: Neither.
> …

1 Plutarch, *Apophthegmata Laconica*, 233e, and *De garrulitate*, 17.

PHILIP OF MACEDON: If I conquer your land, I will destroy your farms, slay your people, and raze your city.
SPARTANS: If.

When humans disagree, they can thump each other; or they can resort to words. When humans thump each other, they are (broadly speaking, and leaving aside the ritual aspects that combat, too, often wears) subject to the laws of physics, anatomy, and biomechanics. But when humans resort to words, they immediately become subject – as well – to the standards and the norms of a realm completely different from physics or biology. To talk with each other at all, instead of thumping each other, is *ipso facto* to accept these standards. Because those standards say that certain ways of talking count as *success*, and other ways of talking count as *failure*, by choosing talk rather than violence we open ourselves up to the possibility of a quite different kind of victory; and a quite different kind of defeat.

To go by Plutarch's report (admittedly it was written about 440 years later), this is what Sparta's ephors did to Philip in these two exchanges. Philip's messages presupposed that if he chose to, Philip would militarily overwhelm the city of Sparta. The Spartan retorts punctured this presupposition, and in doing so adroitly referenced a familiar trope about Spartans – that they are laconic; which of course is why Plutarch quotes the anecdotes.

For all his huge army, Philip lost the verbal exchange, and he lost heavily. If it really happened, his verbal defeat at the hands of the Spartans may well have been a genuine political embarrassment. Certainly *something* made Philip leave Sparta merely isolated, rather than trying to flatten it by the direct application of military might. Perhaps, at least partly, it was Philip's verbal defeat by the Spartans that put off the would-be military conquerors. If so, the moral – and it is one that would have appealed to the middle-Platonist Plutarch – is that the pen can be mightier than the sword. Jaw-jaw can be, not only *better* than war-war, but also more causally effective. Deployments or invocations of the laws of talk can, and sometimes do, override or count for more than applications of the laws of physics and biology.

Yet the most characteristic and distinctive feature of "the laws of talk" is just this, that if they are *laws* at all, they are not laws in anything like the way that the laws of science are laws. Only a miracle can break a law of physics. But the laws of talk can be broken at any time by anyone who chooses to. One obvious way to break them is to fall back on violence: you're losing at chess, so you throw the board out of the window. When someone makes a joke at my expense, I can try and get my own back by topping his joke; but I can also try and get my

own back by topping *him*. In *Iliad* Book 1.188–192, Achilles wonders whether to carry on *talking* with Agamemnon, or attack him instead. Philip seems to have accepted that he lost the verbal exchange, fair and square, according to the laws of talk that he and the Spartans alike recognised. Apparently for that reason, he backed off. But he could instead have broken those laws, e.g. by breaking off the diplomatic exchange, killing the Spartans' messengers, and invading Laconia. (Or trying to.)

Again: in themselves, and leaving aside the human activity of explanation, the laws of physics are not "invoked" or "deployed" by voluntary choice. They just *apply*, because of the nature of things. In a sense, the laws of talk also "just apply"; but (to a first approximation) they apply by way of humans' mutual expectations, not "because of the nature of things". And they *are* invoked and deployed by voluntary choice; as the anecdote from Plutarch shows, there is such a thing as skill and success in invoking and deploying them.

In all talk, then, there is normativity. What kind of normativity? And where might it lead us?

2

My main concern in this paper is with the classical Greek tradition, particularly the early and middle Plato, particularly (or at any rate eventually) the *Theaetetus*. But two small examples from outside that tradition may help, as a beginning, to give some idea of what I mean by "the normativity of talk".

The first is from Paul Grice, in his classic 1967 paper "Logic and conversation" (GRICE 1989, pp. 22–40), where he is discussing the notion of "conversational implicature". Q is a conversational implicature of P when P is asserted in a context C such that Q, whether or not logically entailed by P, may be reasonably inferred from the assertion of P in C. One key difference between conversational implicature and logical entailment is that conversational implicature is not a logical notion but a sociological one: what conversationally implicates what is a matter of social context and convention, not of truth-tables. A second key difference, therefore, is that many conversational implicatures are not also logical entailments, and conversely many logical entailments are not also conversational implicatures. (If I say to you "The cat is on the mat" then my assertion logically entails both "If p, then p" and indeed "The cat is on the mat and if p, then p", but will not usually have either of these, nor any other trivial truth, as a conversational implicature.)

Grice writes:

> Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a series of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognises in them, at least to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction … at each stage, *some* possible conversational moves would be excluded as conventionally unsuitable. We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected (*ceteris paribus*) to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the Cooperative Principle.
>
> GRICE 1969, pp. 26–27

From this general idea of conversational cooperation Grice goes on to piece out some specific applications of the notion:

> … Echoing Kant, I call these categories Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. The category of Quantity relates to the quantity of information to be provided; under it fall the following maxims:
>
> 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
> 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
>
> … Under the category of Quality falls a supermaxim – "Try to make your contribution one that is true" – and two more specific maxims:
>
> 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
> 2. Do not say that for which you lack sufficient evidence.
>
> … Under the category of Relation I place a single maxim, namely, "Be relevant"…
>
> Finally, under the category of Manner … I include the supermaxim – "Be perspicuous" – and various maxims such as:
>
> 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
> 2. Avoid ambiguity.
> 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
> 4. Be orderly.
>
> And one might need others …

It is an open question, at any rate to me, how far Grice thought of these norms as expressive of anything like *ethical* normativity or requiredness; he certainly doesn't openly *say* that these requirements on speakers are moral

requirements, and p. 28 seems to distinguish “conversational maxims” like these from “aesthetic, social, or moral” maxims, as if these were exclusive categories. However, it should be easy to see how closely connected this sort of normativity in talk is with specifically ethical normativity. For a start, there are the overt references to cooperation and to truth-telling. Moreover, these are *conventional* requirements.

That word “conventional” is so often heard as a diminishing qualification, or as the antonym of “really moral(ly required)” or the like. But what Grice brings to light here is, on the contrary, how close the connections between the ethical and the conventional necessarily are. The point of conventions is, we might say, to make particular expectations reasonable; and to live with others is to live in the light of such reasonable expectations; and these facts about our life together are a matter of common knowledge. Therefore, all sorts of trusting, promising, and coordination are going to depend on just these sorts of expectations. In the conditions of civil society, these expectations therefore readily become matters of moral significance – as indeed do the Austinian “felicity conditions”, which are sociological specifications of when and how, in our society or any society much like it, warnings, commands, requests, and declarations do not “misfire” but become appropriate, apt, and such as to demand a response from others in society (AUSTIN 1962).

Grice’s “maxims of conversation”, then, however much they may *start* by looking like a (possibly rather dry) piece of ordinary-language philosophy, are naturally such as to display a kind of mission-creep or expansiveness. Under examination, these norms of talk rapidly expand into something very like *moral* norms on how we are to interact with each other. And that of course is precisely the point that I want to develop in this paper, because I think it is an idea that Plato has too: the idea that norms of conversation are almost never *only* norms of conversation.

This point will be even more obvious with my second example of the normativity of talk, which is a case, from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, of something very like what Habermas, Apel, and other post-Kantian ethicists have often called “the politics of recognition”:

> Vronsky did not even try to sleep that night [on the train to St Petersburg from Moscow]. He sat in his place, his eyes staring straight before him or scanning the people who got in or out; and if on previous occasions his air of imperturbable composure had struck and upset those who did not know him, he now seemed haughtier and more self-sufficient than ever. He looked at people as if they were things. A nervous young man, a clerk at the local courts, sitting opposite, began to detest him on account of that look. The young man asked him for a light, addressed remarks to

> him, and even nudged him to make him feel that he was not a thing but a person; but Vronsky paid no more heed to him than to the lamp, and the young man made a wry face, feeling that he was losing his self-control under the stress of this refusal to recognise him as a human being, and because of it could not get to sleep.
>
> TOLSTOY, *Anna Karenina*, 1876/1954, pp. 119–120

J.L. Austin and Paul Grice are both of them far too much the English gentleman to take it as anything but a matter of course that good manners requires a courteous attentiveness to those around us, and that to "look at people as if they were things", as Vronsky does here, is a singular failure in that requirement of courtesy. With both Austin's felicity conditions and Grice's conversational maxims, that requirement never quite gets into their frame. Of course there can – outside very tight limits – be neither felicitous speech-acts, nor conversational cooperation, without this kind of courtesy, this kind of mutual human recognition. But the need for it is too big and too obvious for either Austin or Grice to feel the need to spell it out. Still, for philosophers' purposes if not for English gentlemen, this requirement *does* need spelling out; and in this passage, a Russian gentleman spells it out – by depicting a Russian gentleman who is failing to respect the requirement.

So much to introduce the notion of the normativity of talk, and to illustrate to some small extent what an expansive notion that notion is: how easily it overspills from conversational appropriateness into rather deep requirements of interpersonal justice. With this much in hand, I return to the Greeks.

3

One way to write an intellectual history of the classical Greek tradition would be as a history of its different conceptions of the normativity of talk. The very obvious idea that both the alternatives, jaw and war, are possible, and that dialogue is better than fighting, and that dialogue has its own rules just as much as fighting does, is already present in Homer. The whole shape of the *Iliad* is framed by the fracturing Achilles-Agamemnon exchange in Book 1 and the healing Achilles-Priam exchange in Book 24: the narrative runs from an unsuccessful and acrimonious discussion, via the intense and protracted human suffering that is (in large part) caused by the failure of that debate, to the eirenic and lyrically sad conversation, ending in agreement, that concludes at any rate that round of human suffering.

There are rules for Homeric debaters, and they debate well when they follow these rules. Just from an examination of *Iliad* Books 1 and 2, we can work

quite some way towards listing them. (1) Rather as in *Lord of the Flies*, don't speak when you are not holding the staff (1.245). (2) If you are a lowly person like Thersites, don't speak at all (2.212–277). (3) Speak gently and carefully and wisely, as Nestor does, not rashly and angrily and divisively, as Agamemnon and Achilles do (1.247–253). (4) Show respect and reverence for other speakers, especially those who are recognised as old and wise and have long and distinguished military careers behind them (1.275–284). (5) When debate is getting hot and angry, calm it down by telling a diverting anecdote; ideally one that quietly reinforces your own prestige and your own claim to be heard – but in a *quiet* way, not so blatantly as to sound like mere bluster (1.259–274). (6) If you want to insult someone, make sure your insults are accurate enough to have some bite (1.225–245). (7) Don't dishonour or humiliate others by inept or clumsy speech, but only if you actually mean to dishonour or humiliate them (1.173–187). (As in the classic definition of a gentleman: «A gentleman is someone who is never rude unintentionally».)

We could run through the rest of Greek literature to bring out what kind or kinds of normativity of talk we find in it. We could focus on discussions that involve serious disagreement. Greek tragedy, for instance – and likewise comedy – is full of various kinds of disagreement-based debates, including debates about values, the nature of the gods, and indeed both: the courtroom scene at the climax of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is perhaps the most famous example in tragedy, and we might take the whole of Aristophanes' *Clouds* as a comic debate about education (and no less a serious debate for being a comic debate). Then there are the debates of the real-life Athenian courts and the Assembly, of which we have abundant evidence in the Greek orators.

Thucydides too has an account of the kind of normativity of talk that he was interested in. In his *Histories*, it is often more or less right to say, simply, that to be a virtuous political debater is to be everything Cleon is not, and nothing he is. It is to be neither violent nor speciously persuasive; and it is to be free from paranoia and aggression, honest and genial, not to operate by manufacturing either popular panic or cheap laughs, and to speak seriously and sincerely and without bullshit. (See further WOODHEAD 1960.)

This Thucydidean picture of what it takes to be a good participant in political and civic conversation, dialogue, or debate is part of the broader consensus among upper-class Athenian democrats of their time that forms the backdrop to the arrival of Socrates, with his distinctive picture of the normativity of talk. What is Socrates' conception, and how does it differ from the conception found in predecessors like Thucydides,[2] or the dramatists, or Homer?

---

2 One way to study the differences between Thucydides and Socrates is to begin from Plato's parody of Thucydides (and of his hero Pericles) in the *Menexenus*. See TRIVIGNO (2009).

4

Socrates has a distinctive, new, and apparently shocking conception of the normativity of talk. In Plato's *Apology* he tells us that this conception was inaugurated by a divine oracle. Apollo's priestess tells Chaerephon that no one is wiser than Socrates (*Apology* 21a): Socrates' response is to investigate this Delphic utterance by trying to find someone wiser than himself. He looks among the politicians, the poets, and the craftsmen. But all prove to be not only lacking in wisdom but deluded as well. The politicians think they have wisdom when they don't (21d); the poets speak well, yet cannot speak at all about *how* they speak well, or what their fine words mean (22b) – their words seem to be prophetic utterances that bypass their own intelligence (22c). As for the craftsmen, they are indeed expert in their own areas; but unfortunately that very expertise, local though it is, gives them the same illusion as the poets have – it makes them imagine that they have expertise, not only about the relatively small matter of their own craft, but about everything, even the most important things. And this false imagining is a serious enough flaw in their understanding to justify withdrawing from them the name *sophoi* (22d–e).

Here Socrates is reporting the *results* of applying his own conception of the normativity of talk. He does not yet tell us in any detail what his *method* is for applying his conception: only that he is looking for evidence that people know and understand what they themselves are doing, and how they do it; also, and alongside that, that they know what they do *not* know or understand. But that comes next. His method is, of course, the famous elenchus, cross-examination by questioning, and very shortly after the narrative just summarised, Socrates gives an example of it (24c–28a), cross-examining his accuser Meletus. He already calls this «making my argument in my accustomed way» (27b).

Socrates' cross-examination is ruthless, and Meletus is completely put to shame by it. Socrates first exposes Meletus as an essentially unserious person, who claims to care about the well-being of the young men of Athens, but cannot give any convincing explanation of what makes those young men better (24c–25c). Then he shows that Meletus is committed to the view that Socrates is harming his young associates deliberately; but, Socrates argues, this is indefensible, because no one does anything bad deliberately (25c–26a). Next comes a demonstration that Meletus, who claims to know that he has justification to accuse Socrates of impiety, does not even know what Socrates believes about the gods (26a–27a). Finally Socrates shows that, given the widespread understanding that he, Socrates, believes he has a *daimonion*, it follows that he cannot be an atheist, as Meletus charges (27a–28a).

This exchange has perhaps not been as focal to philosophical discussions of Socratic elenchus as it should have been. It is the most certainly-authentic example that we get of what elenchus was actually like; it is certainly one of the most "Socratic" performances that we get from Plato's Socrates. And clear rules for Socratic debate – the contours of his particular conception of the normativity of talk – do begin to emerge from it, when we take it together with 21a–22d and reflect on them a little:

1. You have to answer the question put to you: clearly, straightforwardly, as simply as possible, and without evasion, changing the subject, or long-winded bluster (*makrologia*).
2. You have to speak the truth sincerely and seriously as you yourself understand it; you can play around a bit as a warm-up, but once the conversation proper begins, you must not mess about, or speak in jest.
3. You cannot claim to know A, if knowing A presupposes knowing B, and you do not know B.
4. You should admit it when you *don't* know something: unfeigned ignorance is always better than feigned knowledge – indeed unfeigned ignorance is always better than unfeigned ignorance *plus* feigned knowledge (22e).
5. If you claim to know something, then you need to be able to back that up, by showing that you know that you know it: you need to be able to explain *how* you know it, and what it is that you know.
6. Proper knowledge is general: if you can talk only about one thing in isolation, without being able to talk about all the things with which it is connected, then you don't really know very much at all.
7. Finally and perhaps most important of all: you know something if and only if you can explain it in words.

We might even compare *this* account of the normativity of talk – an early one, coming from before Plato's "ambitious" phase – with the one that is enunciated by Protagoras in his rebuke to Socrates in the *Theaetetus* – which as I read Plato, was written in the aftermath of the collapse of (at any rate) his methodological ambition. From that passage, in combination with the evidence of dialogues like the *Euthydemus*, we might perhaps even derive a list of Ten Socratic Commandments:

1. You must respect your interlocutor, and treat him with the dignity and decorum that is due to him; conversely, he must treat you the same way. So both you and he must avoid threats, insults, abuse, browbeating, lies, deception, misrepresentation, demagogic haranguing (*Protagoras* 336b, *Republic* 350e, *Theaetetus* 162d, *Gorgias* 482c, 494d, 513a, 519d), and violence

of speech like Thrasymachus' in *Republic* 1, or Anytus' in the *Meno*, or Polus' and Callicles' in the *Gorgias* – or indeed that of Thucydides' Cleon.

2. It is wrong to seek to win the argument by logical-verbal trickery of the kind that Socrates indulges in at times against Protagoras; such trickery as is also relentlessly presented – and parodied – in the *Euthydemus*, or by leading questions of the kind that Callicles complains about towards the end of the *Gorgias*.
3. *Eironeia* («irony») is wrong; that is, it is wrong to use an insincere pretence of ignorance of what your interlocutor is talking about, as a way to tie him in knots, exasperate him, make him do all the explaining (which you then pick further holes in), and generally subject him to unfair demands to provide evidence and unfair onuses (onera?) of proof. (In contemporary internet slang, *eironeia* is «sealioning».) (For Thrasymachus accusing Socrates of irony, see *Republic* 337a3.)
4. *Makrologia* («longwindedness») is wrong, whether it is designed to talk out the clock or to move the audience on to further points before the earlier ones have been properly examined, or as a way of keeping a thesis alive by bluster, or all three.
5. It is wrong to seek to win the argument by fancy tricks of any sort: e.g. the games of which Socrates accuses the two sophists in the *Euthydemus*, or high-faluting rhetoric (like Pericles' in the *Menexenus* or Protagoras's in the *Protagoras*) or fancy poetical talk (like Agathon's in the *Symposium*) or magical hypnosis (such as Meno accuses Socrates of in the *Meno*) or a blinding-with-science show of specialist knowledge (like Eryximachus' in the *Symposium*) or *demogoria*, «playing to the gallery», «rabble-rousing».
6. It is wrong to seek to win the argument by claims of special revelation, like Euthyphro's in the *Euthyphro*, or by appealing to any kind of authority outside your own mind, and beyond what you can defend by your own wits here and now; it is *your* thesis that is under discussion, not anyone else's, and *you* must be the one to defend it.
7. In fact, it is wrong to seek to *win* the argument at all, full stop. In dialogue the aim is not competition but cooperation: it is to get at the truth by our *joint* efforts. And the way to do that, as above, is to «follow the argument wherever it leads» (*Republic* 394d10, *Theaetetus* 172d) – even if it leads somewhere personally embarrassing to oneself.
8. As the ghost of Protagoras chides Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, it is wrong to attack a thesis uncharitably – that is, by straw-manning it, by opposing it without considering it in its strongest and most plausible formulation, as presented by its ablest and most vigorous advocate.

9. It is wrong, too, as ghost-Protagoras goes on to say, whether or not it is deliberately done, to display *ignoratio elenchi* by failing to state the thesis accurately, by changing the subject, or by speaking irrelevantly, e.g. with small-minded pedantry.
10. As Protagoras' ghost also reminds Socrates, it is wrong to argue by appealing to mere probability, as for example by presenting a weak and unconvincing *reductio ad absurdum* (an appeal to mere shock-value or to "common sense", where that is no better than prejudice).

With this brief outline in hand of Socrates' conception of the normativity of talk, the rules that govern conversation, I turn next to two very different conversations that also have something to teach us about that kind of normativity: the dialogues depicted in Plato's *Euthydemus* and *Meno*.

5

In the small-scale example of Socratic elenchus that we get at *Apology* 24c–28a, we have a well-ruled and orderly conversation. Socrates knows what he is doing, and he succeeds in getting Meletus to cooperate as he needs him to. By contrast, much of the *Euthydemus* depicts a deeply and persistently *un*ruly conversation. Socrates is control of the conversation for two brief spells, at 278d–282e and 288d–292e, where in both cases he is talking to Cleinias, not to Dionysodorus or Euthydemus. Those interludes apart, the debate with the two sophists at the heart of the *Euthydemus* (273c–304b) is a study of dialogical *mis*rule, of what it is like when a *warped* conception of the normativity of talk is in the saddle. For that is clearly the point about Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. As Socrates puts it, pretty bluntly, in his last words to them at 303c–304b, their "elenchus" is a disgrace, a stitch-up – a stultification of their hearers' rational capacity (their ability to engage in *logos*), about which the only good point is that they also stultify themselves (303d). They have a corrupted conception of the normativity of talk; and that, as we have already seen in the *Apology*, is even worse than having no conception of it at all.

Yet manifestly Euthydemus and Dionysodorus are in a normative business. Discussions with them do follow rules, and it is in virtue of these rules that they and their interlocutors win or lose the discussion. (They are particularly insistent on a rule that they in fact share with Socrates – roughly his Rule 1, «Answer the question, *without* replying with a distracting addition or another question»: see e.g. 295b5, 295d1, 297b7.) Normally, of course, they win and their interlocutors lose: that is their reputation, and that is why they are called

«pancratiasts», «all-round fighters» (272a) – because they give out to be able to win against all comers in every kind of verbal contest.

Their verbal acumen, however, is not a matter of pursuing, identifying, or defending the *truth* as such. In fact, they are strikingly indifferent to the truth (272a–b): «the two of them have become so awesome at battling in words and at exposing as false what people always say – just as much when that is false as when it is true». It is not for nothing that they are compared to athletes. For on their conception, the normativity of talk is very much like the normativity of a competitive sport:

> … At this point Dionysodorus bent a little towards my ear, smiling all over his face, and said «But really, Socrates, I'll tell you in advance – the young man [Cleinias] is going to be refuted, *whichever* way he answers.»
>
> *Euthyd.* 275e

> … When [Euthydemus] said this, it was like a theatre director had given a cue to the chorus: all those followers of the two sophists kicked up a roar and a laugh together. And before the young man could well get his breath back, Dionysodorus took up the case….
>
> *Euthyd.* 276b–c

As the dialogue demonstrates at length, what Euthydemus and Dionysodorus do for a living is exactly what Socrates was charged with by Anytus and Meletus (*Apology* 19b): they make the worse argument appear the better. (Their most outrageous arguments are displayed in *Euthydemus* 295e–303b, with Ctesippus or Socrates as respondent: this is where they "prove", for example, that Socrates has no father (298b), that Ctesippus' father is a dog whom he beats (298d–e), and so on. Secondly, they are guilty of what Meletus is charged with by Socrates: a lack of seriousness. More specifically, and perhaps most importantly of all, a third charge against them is that they have no real interest in improving Cleinias. At 273d Euthydemus says that he and his brother teach virtue; so Socrates (273d–e) urges them to give a display of their *episteme* of teaching virtue. They reply that «exactly that is our very reason for being present, Socrates – to display and teach it, if anyone wishes to learn it» (274a–b). They are then supposed to provide this display, and Socrates presents to them the young Cleinias as the subject for their instruction. But instead of teaching him virtue, Socrates goes on to protest, they just play games with him. No doubt Euthydemus and Dionysodorus will insist that their tricksy questioning of Cleinias *is* teaching him virtue; there is certainly more to say about the two puzzles about learning that they present him with, and I say some of it in

section 7. But Socrates is having none of their puzzles. And his protest against them is, precisely, that they violate the normativity of talk as he understands it.

> In the inquiries of the learned, Cleinias, these tricks with words are games; that is why I say that Dionysodorus and Euthydemus are playing a game with you. And I call it a game for this reason: someone could learn lots of tricks like this, perhaps the whole repertoire, but that would not give him any more knowledge at all about how the real questions stand. It would just make him good at playing this game with people – tripping them up, turning them upside down with ambiguities. It's like the types who whip the chair away just as someone is sitting down, and laugh with delight when they see him flat on his back.
>
> So, Cleinias, assume that everything up to now has just been playing a game. From here on, for sure, Dionysodorus and Euthydemus will put on display their own *serious* ideas; and I shall be here to guide them into rendering me what they have promised. For they said that they were going give a demonstration of their expertise in invitational speeches – but then, it seems, they thought they should have a little sport with you first.
>
> And Dionysodorus and Euthydemus: let this be the end of your games; this, perhaps, is enough. The thing to do now, with the games over, is for you to give your demonstration: make your exhortation (προτρέποντε) to Cleinias, showing him what should be the form of his dedication to wisdom and to virtue.
>
> *Euthyd.* 278b–d

One point that we may extract from this speech is a further Socratic rule of conversation. Alongside its moral "Stick to the point", which is in effect Rule 1 above, the passage also points the moral: "Keep your promises about what you are going to discuss". It is because the sophist brothers fail (in Socrates' eyes) to keep their promise to provide an invitational speech and elenchus to move Cleinias towards virtue and wisdom, that Socrates takes it upon himself to do just that in the first of the two passages where he, as a contrast, displays his own conception of how to do "protreptic" (*Euthydemus* 278d–282e; the second, as above, is 288d–292e).

Dionysodorus and Euthydemus «make the worse argument the better»; they are flippant and unserious in inquiry; they don't care about the truth; their form of argument is recognised by all right-thinking people as a disgrace; they stultify both their hearers and themselves; in short, they corrupt the youth. This is a charge-sheet of ways of having a corrupt conception of the normativity of talk. It is also a list of ways of being bad antitypes of Socrates himself.

For the charge that *Socrates* corrupts the youth, see *Apology* 19b, already cited. For the charge that *Socrates'* elenchus is disgraceful, youth-corrupting, and no better than a game with no real concern for the truth, see Callicles' set-piece *anti*-protreptic to philosophy at *Gorgias* 481c–486d. And the *Euthydemus* itself is just about to provide an example of Socrates running into self-stultification, and stultification of Cleinias too, when they reach the *aporia* of 292e.

Moreover the charge of stultification against the twin sophists is closely parallel to things that are said against Socrates: the sting-ray passage, *Meno* 80a–c, is the most obvious parallel of all. A further analogy with the *Meno* emerges when we consider another, quite remarkable claim that Dionysodorus and Euthydemus make – namely, that they *know everything*, and so does everyone else (*Euthydemus* 294a–295a; cp. «There is no ignorance» at 286d and the word *passophoi* at 271d). Here too, it seems, Plato is deliberately setting up the twin sophists as bad antitypes of Socrates. For at *Meno* 81c, Socrates too takes very seriously a claim, to be examined more closely in section 7, that there is a way for anyone at all to know everything.

In both the *Meno* and the *Euthydemus* alike Socrates is sceptical about whether virtue can be taught at all (*Euthydemus* 274d, *Meno* 89e); in both alike he criticises someone else's method of conversation, yet runs into an *aporia* by pursuing his own method (*Euthydemus* 292c, *Meno* 89d); in both alike Socrates offers a sort of eudaimonistic view, from which the important consequences follow that all humans seek the good, and no one does wrong voluntarily (*Euthydemus* 278e–282c, *Meno* 77b–78b). The more we look at the two dialogues, the more the *Meno* and *Eythydemus* begin to look like a pair that were consciously written as a pair. (So "Which of them was written first?" is not quite the right question; what I am suggesting is that they were written together, and probably each was revised in light of the other.)

But there is also this crucial contrast: the *Euthydemus* is a genuinely aporetic dialogue, in a way that the *Meno* is not. It matters that the *Euthydemus* more or less ends, rather surprisingly, with Socrates being floored by Dionysodorus (300e–303b); whereas towards the end of the *Meno*, we find Socrates flooring Anytus (90c–95e). Both dialogues alike hold out the hope of a way of conducting conversation, according to the normativity of talk, that will genuinely lead to convergence on the truth: all we need for that to happen is simply – in the famous and beguiling formula – «to follow the argument where it leads» (*Republic* 394d, *Phaedo* 107b; cp. *Euthyphro* 14c, *Crito* 46b). But the *Euthydemus* ends with a genuine, not just a staged, frustration: Socrates concludes with the observation that he has seen Ctesippus learning how to teach virtue from the twin sophists, so now he asks admission to their classes for himself and Cleinias (*Euthydemus* 304b).

Isn't the *Meno* aporetic too? Officially, yes; it certainly ends with a confession that Socrates has not even begun to get where he wanted to get to. But there are three points to make here. First, the exact wording of Socrates' "admission of defeat" at the end of the *Meno* is important, and so is the contrast with the parallel admission in the *Euthydemus*. As just pointed out, that finishes with Socrates rather ridiculously (and of course ironically) undertaking to be taught virtue, and taught how to teach virtue, by two obviously fraudulent teachers. In the *Meno*, by contrast, we end with a carefully qualified statement from Socrates (99e–100b). Virtue, he says, is neither natural nor teachable, and comes by divine gift (or if you prefer, by bald luck); *unless there is some statesman who can teach it*. So Socrates has dropped the farcical pretence of the *Euthydemus*, that sophistical frauds like those two could possibly have anything to teach anyone (let alone Socrates himself) about virtue. And he has opened the door to the possibility of a better kind of teacher: "some statesman who can make another into a statesman". He is – he says – not yet in a position to say much about what that teacher of virtue will be like. But one thing he does know is that that teacher will not begin his inquiries with the question that Meno has insisted on, whether virtue can be taught; but with the prior and more important question that he, Socrates, has all along been trying to promote instead (*Meno* 71b–d) – what virtue *is*.

A second point of contrast with the *Euthydemus* is that the *Meno* offers us a clearer explanation than any previous dialogue of *what it is that is needed*, in general and in the abstract, in order for normatively-governed talk to converge on the truth. The explanation is that normatively-governed talk will so converge when it not only gets to the truth, but contains within itself an explanation of *how and why* it gets to the truth. True beliefs, as it famously suggests, need to be accompanied by a *logos*, an account of why they are true, if they are to be better than lucky guesses – pleasing stories that wander around randomly like clockwork toys or runaway slaves (*Meno* 97d–98b).

Thirdly: not only does the *Meno* offer us a clearer than ever before explanation of how, in general and in the abstract, normatively-governed talk can converge on the truth. At the heart of the dialogue, it gives us a worked example of exactly that: the famous elenchus with the slave-boy at 81e–86c. (It is of course not accidental that the *Meno* actually shows us a literal slave being «bound with an account».) At this stage in his philosophical career, *this* is what Plato thinks it looks like when a philosophical exchange happens according to the norms of conversation; and *this* is what he means by convergence on the truth.

Here is where the parallels and the contrasts between the *Euthydemus* and the *Meno* are at their sharpest: in the case of the puzzles about knowledge that are central to both. I look more closely at these puzzles in the next section.

6

«Is it the wise or the foolish who learn?» Euthydemus asks Cleinias. Not the wise, because they already know (*Euthydemus* 276b); but not the foolish either, because they are no good at learning (276c). And: «Do learners know what they learn, or not?» asks Euthydemus. It is no good for Cleinias to answer that they do not know it. For spelling, for instance, involves knowing your letters – so when you «learn your letters» you learn what you know (277a; cp. *Theaetetus* 207d–28b). But it is no good to answer that they do know it, either (277b–c); for to learn is to come to know, and you can't come to know if you *already* know.

Intervening in this eristic wrestling match before Cleinias can be thrown a third time, Socrates protests, in Prodicus' style, that the root of the problem is simply the ambiguity of the Greek word *manthanein*, meaning both «to come to know» and also to «understand» (277d–278c). Maybe there is something in that protest; but it plays no further part in the dialogue, and the availability of the move does nothing to stop Socrates admitting his own defeat at 304b. It is reasonable to infer that the solution to the problem that seems right to Plato is not in the style of Prodicus, and is not presented in the *Euthydemus* at all. It is in a new style, neither the style of Socrates' teacher Prodicus, nor indeed the style of Plato's teacher Socrates; and it is in the *Meno*.

The parallel puzzle about knowledge in the *Meno* is "Meno's paradox", or as it is also called, "the paradox of inquiry":[3]

> MENO: But Socrates – how will you search for something, when you do not know at all what that something is? Out of the range of *things that you don't know*, which of them will you put before yourself to be the objective of your search? Or even if, in the best case, you do stumble upon your objective, how will you know that it *is* your objective, given that you didn't know it?
>
> *Meno*, 80d

Inquiry is *search* (literally so, in the Greek: *zētēsis*), and there is no searching, says Meno, unless you know already what you are looking for. But then how can there be any gap between quest and quarry? The quest is: *looking for it, knowing what you are looking for*; the quarry is: *knowing it* – which is already part of the quest. Here it is not so much "Seek and ye shall find" as "To seek is already to have found".

---

3 Here and in the next section I draw on my discussion of Meno's paradox in "Plato on memory", in BERNECKER & MICHAELIAN (2017).

In the *Meno*, the essence of Socrates' reply to Meno's dilemma is not the ambiguity in *manthanein* to which he appeals to answer the sophists at *Euthydemus* 277d–278c. It is, rather, the claim that, at least in intellectual searching (quotidian physical searches, say for a lost sock, seem to be a different matter), it is just true that to seek is already to have found. The stereotype of all inquiry is indeed "looking for it, knowing what you are looking for", and "knowing it" is indeed already a part of this stereotype. In the intellectual case – where there can be no *physical* dislocation between you and your quarry, as there can be between you and a lost sock – this really does mean that, even at the beginning of the inquiry, you already have hold of what you are seeking. But crucially, *you can know what you are seeking without realising that you know it*. What you need to do when you are in this condition is find a way to access, summon up, or *realise* that you already know the answer to your question. This kind of bringing-to-consciousness what you already unconsciously know is what Plato means by *anamnēsis*, recollection.

> Since the soul is immortal and has come into being many times, and since it has seen this world and the World of the Dead and everything there is, there is nothing that it has not always already learned. Therefore it is no wonder that the soul should be able to remember everything it ever knew, about everything including virtue; for the soul already knew it all before. Everything that exists is akin to everything else, and the soul always already knew everything. So once the soul has recollected just one thing in this life – this recollection is what people call *learning* – there is nothing to prevent the soul from drawing out of it everything else there is to know: if we are only courageous in our quest, and do not grow weary. And so, inquiry and learning is entirely recollection.
>
> *Meno* 81c–d

The possibility of intellectual inquiry depends not on a gap between quest and quarry, or between not-knowing and knowing: the advocates of Meno's dilemma are right that in the intellectual case there is no such gap. (The mental is, as one later Platonist – Descartes – will famously put it, *unextended*.) Instead it depends on a gap between unconscious and conscious knowing. This is the gap that is crossed by recollection. And what happens with the slave boy, in his famous discussion of a geometrical problem with Socrates immediately after this exposition (82b–86b), is as I say a worked example of just this kind of recollection. The slave boy is able to work out how to construct the square of twice the area of any given square, because, in a sense, *he already knows* (85d–86a).

> [He understands] by recovering the knowledge himself, from within himself, with the help of no teacher, but merely of someone who asks him questions … this "recovering the knowledge himself, from within himself" [is] recollection … he didn't acquire these beliefs in this life, [so] it is clear that at *any* time he must already have had them and "learned" them.
>
> *Meno*, 85d–86a

7

Socrates' preoccupation with the normativity of talk leads him, in the *Meno*, into a giddily ambitious aspiration: the aspiration to a form of dialogue that, if you run it right, will *necessarily* get you the right results.

All along in the early dialogues, the aspiration is that Socratic conversations are to have rules such that, when we obey those rules, we get a particular kind of conversation, because the rules rule out certain forms of advocacy and certain forms of argument. In the aporetic dialogues, the resulting conversations often seem to converge on the negative conclusion that we don't know what we thought we did, and perhaps don't know anything at all.

So on Socrates' own account as we see it in Plato's Socratic dialogues, we may say that the results of Socratic conversation are *negatively convergent*. As opposed to Socrates' account on Aristophanes' portrayal in the *Clouds*, on which, we might say, Socrates talks a lot of nonsense, but not just one sort of nonsense. Aristophanes' Socrates talks all kinds of random codswallop that takes us in all sorts of directions, just as his balloon or swing or whatever it is (*Apology* 19c) takes him in all sorts of directions. We might say that for Aristophanes' Socrates, the results of conversation are negatively *di*vergent.

But in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium,* and the *Republic*, the ambition becomes much higher. The search is on for a kind of dialogue such that, for it, form will not just partially but *completely* determine content. The idea now is that if you follow the rules dictated by the normativity of talk, not only will your rule-following preclude *some* results that are other than the right ones; it will preclude *all* results except the right ones. Moreover, these "right results of conversation" will themselves be, not merely the conclusion that we were wrong to think that we knew something, but positive results, particular and definite discoveries about reality. And these positive results will be systematically interconnected: they will be such that, from any one right result, you can also reach all the other right results of conversation. In the words of *Meno* 81c–d as just quoted,

> Everything that exists is akin to everything else, and the soul always already knew everything. So once the soul has recollected just one thing in this life … there is nothing to prevent the soul from drawing out of it everything else there is to know.
>
> *Meno* 81c–d

What is happening here is that Plato, Socrates' greatest pupil, has inherited from his master a particular conception of philosophical conversation; and he is now transforming his inheritance. The ambition that, in different ways, animates four Platonic dialogues in particular – the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and above all the *Republic* – is this aspiration, just described, to a *unique rational convergence*. Just as with Socrates, the idea is that following the rules and the methods of something very like Socratic conversation will bring convergence, at least ultimately, on the same conclusions. But contrary to Socratic scepticism, this convergence-point is not the ultra-negative result that we know nothing. It would be closer to the truth to say that it is the ultra-positive result that we know everything.

Perhaps the Plato of these four dialogues could have taken as his motto Parmenides' ξυνὸν δέ μοί ἐστιν, ὁππόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἵξομαι αὖθις («It is all the same to me, what place I start from; for to that place I shall come back again»: DK28 B5). In this ambitious phase of his thought Plato aspires, like Parmenides, to a form of discourse such that, in it, you can start *from anywhere* and still get, just the same, to the centre of the circle. All you need to do is move in a straight line in the right direction; that is, all you need to do is follow the Socratic method and the Socratic rules in your conversation. Do that, and you will thereby move at least *some* way towards the unique focal point of ultimate dialectical convergence – no matter where you started from. Whether your starting point was a geometrical puzzle as in the *Meno*, or a boyfriend's lyre as in the *Phaedo*, or a whole variety of poetic, rhetorical, and scientific speeches in praise of Love given at a mildly drunken and extremely flirtatious Athenian dinner party – from any of these points alike the process of positive dialectic can equally well take its beginning. (I don't mean that this process *does*, necessarily, get anywhere very much in the actual texts of Plato's dialogues, because in those actual texts it is of course not always the case that the rules of Socratic conversation are obeyed; they are as much studies of *breaking* the rules of the normativity of talk as of *keeping* them. I mean that Plato is exploring the assumption that it *can*.).

In these four dialogues, therefore, the central challenge for Plato is to show how this positive convergence is supposed to work: how it is that rational

conversation that follows the rules will eventually always lead us towards the same focal ultimate truths. However, the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and the *Republic* between them give us at least four different, and at least three conflicting, accounts of how the positive dialectic is supposed to go.

The *Meno* and the *Phaedo* both present theories of recollection; but the two dialogues present two *different* theories, and these theories are flatly inconsistent with each other. As we have seen, *Meno* 81c–d suggests this argument from recollection to immortality:

> ***Meno***: Learning (strictly speaking) is impossible: there is only knowing, and recollecting what we already know. But we do know some truths, and can recollect more. Therefore we have never learned, and we have always known, the truths that we recollect. Therefore we have always existed.

Despite Cebes' clearly-signalled intention, at *Phaedo* 72e–73b, to allude to the *Meno*, the *Phaedo* not only does not repeat this argument from recollection to immortality; it actually contradicts it. The argument that the *Phaedo* twice offers us – through Cebes at 72e, through Socrates at 75c–is this:

> ***Phaedo***: At any point in this life, there are some truths that we can be made to recollect by exercises like the slave-boy's geometry lesson in the *Meno*. Therefore, there are always some truths that we already know. Therefore, we cannot have learned these truths in this life. But anything we know, we must have learned at some time. Therefore, we must have learned these truths before we began this life. Therefore, we existed before we began this life. Therefore, we have always existed.

The *Meno* argument says that learning is impossible; the *Phaedo* argument entails that learning is possible. To say both that "Learning is really impossible, and what we call learning is actually recollection of pre-existing knowledge", and also that "Anything we know, we must have learned some time", is inconsistent. Nor can we fix this by adding, truly enough, that the two arguments agree that learning is impossible *in this life*. The argument given in the *Meno* for the impossibility of learning is Meno's dilemma. If that works at all, it works in any life you like.

Maybe the Plato of the *Phaedo* no longer thinks that Meno's dilemma does work. (Maybe Cebes' rather quick and loose presentation of the argument – with its repetition of the hesitant particle *pou*, «I suppose» or «presumably» – is

meant to signal this.). Certainly the *Phaedo* narrows down the scope of what we recollect; it is no longer *everything*, but only specific kinds of objects of knowledge. Alongside this new specificity about the objects of recollection comes a new explicitness about the relation of thought and perception in the process of coming to know; and with it a new willingness, which develops further in the *Republic*, to treat the sorts of "knowledge" that are not easily understood as objects of recollection or similar dialectic as not really cases of *knowledge* at all, but of perception or something like – *doxa* as Plato calls it.

The exact process whereby we "ascend to the Forms" is described by the *Symposium* and the *Republic* in quite different ways, and possibly conflicting ways. Neither the *Symposium* nor the *Republic* is focused on recollection as a means of positive convergence at all; they don't *deny* it, but it does not appear to be what's crucial. In the *Symposium*, rather, what is crucial is a kind of semantic ascent (210e, 211d1):

> When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, contemplating the things of beauty rightly and in order, and is coming already to the completion of the matters of love, suddenly he will have revealed to him something marvellous, beautiful in its very nature; and this, Socrates, is precisely what all those previous labours were for … Beginning from *those* beauties, for the sake of The Beautiful he must always keep on ascending, as if he were using the steps of a ladder: away from one beauty to two; away from two to *all* the beautiful bodies; away from beautiful bodies to beautiful character-traits; away from character-traits to beautiful forms of learning; away from other forms of learning to reach completion in that one study of The Beautiful Itself, which is the study of nothing else but that Beauty, so that in the end he may know what Beautiful is.

And in the *Republic* (Books 6–7) we get a different picture again, and a much more detailed and complex one. The image of the cave, 514a–518b, is one picture of what the process is supposed to be. But the science of dialectic is also expounded via the images of the sun (508a–509b) and the line (509d–511e), and by way of a detailed exposition of how the Guardians are to be educated (517–741). And it is, of course, a matter of long and deep scholarly controversy, which I cannot enter into here, whether this picture is even *internally* consistent, never mind consistent with Plato's other accounts of what began as the normativity of talk or dialogue, but has now become a science in its own right – the science of dialectic.

8

Plato aspires to identify and articulate a form of conversation such that, for it, its form completely and uniquely dictates its content. If we just follow the rules of this kind of normativity of talk – if we just avoid ἀδικεῖν ἐν λόγοις, conversational injustice as we may call it – then we will necessarily and automatically converge on some part of the same structure of positive results – and hence, if we keep on reasoning, we will uncover the rest of that structure too. So in the *Republic* we seek the larger pattern of justice in the city from the smaller pattern of justice in the soul; but at the same time, and orthogonally to both of these quests, we seek both patterns of justice by uncovering the pattern of δικαιοσύνη ἐν λόγοις, conversational justice. For if we follow *that* sort of argument "wherever it goes", it is certain, Plato thinks or at least hopes, to go to the right destination.

For this aspiration to have any chance of success, a positive condition and a negative condition both need to be satisfied. The negative condition is that any alternative to the conversation needs to be, in truth, an unintelligible and incoherent alternative – not really, in fact, an alternative at all; such "alternatives" should be lines of thought that, in a phrase of ANSCOMBE (1963), p. 85's that Cora Diamond (DIAMOND 2019) has recently made much of, «peter out into nothingness».[4] The positive condition is that the particular line that the dialectic takes needs to have a kind of rational inevitability about it; the conversation needs to be somehow *the obvious one to have*, and indeed the only one possible.

These two conditions are both, arguably, satisfied by Socrates' exchange with the slave boy. In that case, we do get an example of a line of thought such that any alternative to it simply does not make any sense. The slave boy *tries* two such alternatives at 82d–83e, where he makes two wrong suggestions about how to construct the square with a doubled area; and what Socrates shows in their discussion is that neither of these suggestions constitutes a coherent train of thought at all – each of them «peters out into nothingness». The case is also an example of a kind of rational inevitability. Presumably, in principle, Socrates' line of questioning could start from somewhere else, or be presented differently (for example in a different language, as we present it today in translations). But it would, necessarily, still move to the same conclusion about how to construct the square with a doubled area – namely, by taking the diagonal as its side. Any alternative presentation of Socrates' proof that we might write out would get closer and closer, line by line, to the proof presented in the *Meno*, and would become identical to that well before its conclusion; moreover, the

4 I review Cora Diamond's book in CHAPPELL (2020).

more any such alternative presentation is direct and mathematically elegant, the sooner it will converge with Socrates' proof.

The trouble is that it is hard to see anywhere *else* where we get anything like the satisfaction of these two conditions for the rational convergence of normatively-guided, conversationally-just philosophical dialectic upon a unique structure of logically-inevitable positive results.

The central rational embarrassment here is not merely the diversity, indeed the actual inconsistency, of Plato's four accounts of the process of norm-governed rational convergence in our conversation, as noted above. Presumably that can be smoothed away either by explaining which of these accounts is the right one and why, and/or by taking it as another example of how accounts that tend to converge can at any rate *start* from different points. The central rational embarrassment, rather, is Socrates' own admission, at *Republic* 506b–507a, that he himself cannot give a proper account of how this rational convergence is supposed to work.

> "But you yourself, Socrates", said Glaucon, "do you believe that knowledge is the good? Or pleasure? Or something else again? … it does not seem just to me that you are ready to state the views of others but not your own, when you have spent all this time being preoccupied with this question".
>
> "Really?" I said: "Do you think it is just for someone to speak about what he does not know, as if he did know? … I fear that I will not be up to it, and that in my eagerness I will make myself absurd and ridiculous. Instead, you blessed men, let us wave goodbye to whatever the good in itself may be, at least for now; it appears to me something beyond my present line of flight to arrive even at my current *opinion* about it. But about what appears to be the offspring of the good, and most nearly similar to it, that I am willing to talk about – if that appeals to you; but if not, we'll let it be".
>
> "Well, speak," he said: "you will pay me the full account of the father another time".
>
> "And how I wish", I said, "that I *could* make that full account, and that you could receive it, and not merely the offspring, as now. But for now, receive this the offspring and the child of the good.…
>
> *Republic*, 506b–507a

The ambition in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* was to identify a conversationally just way of talking such that its form would uniquely determine its content, to give a completely rationally justified positive account of the whole of reality; positive dialectic, as I have been calling it. The ambition was also that this

norm-governed way of talking would itself emerge simply from talking according to the right norms: there was supposed to be a possible positive dialectic, governed by conversational justice, that would itself get us to a positive dialectic that reveals both psychic and political justice. In this crucial passage in the *Republic* the second of these ambitions is completely abandoned. The form of discourse that is going to get us results is, we are now told, only *the offspring of* the full account of the good – an interest payment on the principal, offered up front as an advance on it. Moreover this interest payment on the good is going to take the form of a *likeness* of the good – ἔκγονός τε τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ φαίνεται καὶ ὁμοιότατος ἐκείνῳ. It is going to be a *simile*, an *image* of the good: the triple image, in fact, of sun, line, and cave.

Socrates still undertakes to offer us *some* kind of account of positive dialectic – and of course we get such an account in the latter half of *Republic* Book VII, and particularly at 532e–535a. What that passage speculatively describes is a form of norm-governed talking and thinking that is somehow *self-verifying* – a positive dialectic that itself leads us to positive dialectic, a form of proving things correct that is proved correct by the very process of proving *it* correct (that is why it enables us to "move beyond all conditional steps", 533c9). But the verb is *speculatively describes*: not *identifies* or *deploys*: Plato does not tell us here what positive dialectic *is*, only what he wants it to be able to do. Similarly what *Republic* 506b–507a tells us is that Plato is *still looking for* a self-verifying positive dialectic. And the ambition of the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* was higher: it was not just to *carry on looking for* this positive dialectic, it was to describe it and deploy it and give examples of it at work. That ambition – which as I say was only ever actually realised in any plausible way, even for one kind of case, at *Meno* 80c–86d – is here explicitly abandoned. What we are promised instead, and indeed what we get in the rest of the *Republic*'s discussion of dialectic, is gestures towards a theoretical role for which Plato wants – but has not got – an occupant; gestures, together with the very poetry and metaphor, and the very appeals to images and likenesses, that the *Republic* itself elsewhere condemns.

And so at last, in the light of these prolegomena, we are ready to address the *Theaetetus* directly, as opposed to the narrative in Plato's intellectual development that leads us to it.

9

It is commonplace to say that the *Theaetetus* is an aporetic dialogue, and of course there are good reasons for saying that. It is slightly less commonplace – though in the colossal mountain-ranges of centuries of already-existing Plato

scholarship, certainly not unheard-of – to say that the *Republic* too is aporetic; and I have just laid out some of the reasons why we might say that.

There is, to reiterate, an aspiration that haunts Plato's dialogues from the beginning, the aspiration to find norms of talk such that the *content* of our talk will follow from its form. From the *Meno* on, this aspiration becomes something ambitious indeed: it becomes the aspiration to a normativity of talk such that it content will follow *completely* and *uniquely* and *with inexpugnable rationality* from its form; and such that this content will be a rational explanation of everything that starts from anywhere, but always converges towards the same set of positive and systematically connected results.

Plato sees that, if there *is* a positive dialectic like this, then it should be self-revealing: that is to say, positive dialectic under conditions of conversational justice will itself discover positive dialectic, and justice both conversational and more general; along with all the other things that it also discovers. The story of the *Republic* is the story of how this ideal of perfect *epistemic and ethical* rationality in the soul, alongside the ideal of perfect *political* rationality in the city to which it is supposed to be the analogue, moves, not closer, but *further away*; and in fact, at 506b–507a, retreats decisively – and perhaps for ever – behind the veil of simile, metaphor, imagery, and poetic speech in general. The Republic that Plato dreams of is, he still insists, difficult, but possible somehow (χαλεπὰ μέν, δυνατὰ δέ πῃ, 540d3). But it no longer looks like there is any *rationally cogent* route of discourse or conversation by which to argue for it: it is not perhaps *completely* a dream – but it is a dream (540d2).

So when we turn to the *Theaetetus* we do indeed, as people often say, find ourselves confronted with the aftermath of a philosophical retreat from the high ambitions of earlier works such as the *Republic*. But that retreat has already happened, as outlined above, in the *Republic* itself. And the retreat in question is not, *pace* Ryle, McDowell, Bostock, and Burnyeat, a retreat from the distinctive *doctrines* of the *Republic* – the belief in the Forms as the structure at once of reality and of our knowledge of reality. What the *Theaetetus* retreats from is a method, not a doctrine. What it retreats from is the attempt, begun in its most ambitious form in the *Meno*, to find out by conversational justice the structure of what I have been calling positive dialectic. It retreats, that is, from the Socratic (or immediately post-Socratic) project of finding a norm-governed way of talking in which form will dictate content to the extent that a grasp of the whole structure of reality will follow just from an orderly inquiry into any particular thing.

There is the first-order question what knowledge is. There is also the second-order question "How should we frame the question what knowledge is?" Questions of the latter form are, as I have argued, pervasively audible in the early dialogues; and the *Meno* had seemed to hold out the hope of a systematic

way of answering such second-order questions, and answering the first-order question as well and by the same manoeuvre. The *Republic* still tells us that a completed positive dialectic will answer the second-order question. But it does not tell us, or does not tell us enough for clarity to be achieved, what a positive dialectic will actually *be like*. And just at the crucial point in the *Republic* where we hope for a dialectical explanation of The Good (506b–507a, as above) three huge waves of metaphor and imagery sweep in – Sun, Line, and Cave – and cast obscuring mist-clouds of what Plato himself must regard as imperfect and poetic cognition across key features of the philosophical landscape.

The *Theaetetus* is, obviously, about the first-order question what knowledge is. It is also – in a renewedly Socratic way – about the second-order question "How should we frame the question what knowledge is?" Neither question is answered (not at least clearly or explicitly) in the *Theaetetus*, and it is not even clear what form an answer to either question could take. Yet one thing we might say about the dialogue is that, in fact, the *Theaetetus* is a dialogue in search – in newly disillusioned and newly diffident search – of a method for having dialogues.

For there is something rather random and chaotic about the whole way the actual discussion goes. Since there are also echoes in the *Theaetetus* of the kind of randomness and chaos that we see in the *Meno*, it looks like a carefully-structured and deliberately-planned random chaos. One thing leads to another – it may seem to a first-time reader – almost by free association. It is not unnatural for any reader, either, to think that the links between all three of the main definitions of knowledge offered, and the discussions to which those definitions lead, are decidedly loose; so, at a lower level of (dis)organisation, are the links within those three discussions, between the discussions of Heracleitus, Protagoras, and perceptions in the soul for the first definition; between the five smaller arguments that compose most of the discussion of the second definition; and between the three or four alternative accounts of *logos* that occupy most of the discussion of the third definition. Even one of the most rationally well-ordered parts of the dialogue, Theaetetus' own account of his recent mathematical research (147d–148d), is introduced into the discussion at 147c10–d1 with studied casualness – «What you are after is perhaps something like what came up among us in our discussions just now», κινδυνεύεις ἐρωτᾶν οἷον καὶ αὐτοῖς ἡμῖν ἔναγχος εἰσῆλθε διαλεγομένοις.

It is almost as if Plato were aiming to *labour* the moral that, while the truth of the theory of Forms is off hidden somewhere in some special kind of discussion, hard to participate in, hard to follow, hard to access, hard even to begin – what we find ourselves engaged in in real life is forms of conversation that, though there is normativity in them all right, are far from predictable and as

far as possible from being naturally constructed so as to run along the lines that logic or rationality itself dictates, convergently towards some inherently obvious and inevitable conclusion. Such discussions may, if we are lucky, prove to be pathways into the kinds of exalted truth that Plato continues to hope for. But nothing *guarantees*, either rationally or in any other way, that that kind of finding-the-secret-path-to-truth experience will actually happen to us. Insight continues to come, as it did in the *Meno* and indeed in the *Republic*, via moments of unaccountable intuition or epiphany, or via dreams. With the visionary section at the heart of the *Meno*, 80c–86b, and *Theaet.* 201e–202c, "Socrates' dream", cp. *Resp.* 533b, the ecstatic moment of revelation that – *if we are lucky* – dialectic leads to; *Resp.* 434e–435a, where Socrates expresses the hope that by bringing alongside each other the patterns of virtue in individual and in state and «rubbing them against each other like kindling twigs, we will cause the nature of justice to blaze out» in a *sudden* illumination (ὥσπερ ἐκ πυρείων ἐκλάμψαι ποιήσαιμεν τὴν δικαιοσύνην); and *Resp.* 518d, the point that even a philosophical education cannot *make* us see, it can only point us in the right direction – we then look in that direction *and hope*; and the line at the closing of the *Meno* already alluded to, that knowledge comes to us «by divine dispensation» (99e).

By the time he writes the *Theaetetus*, Plato may not have lost his confidence in the truth of the theory of Forms. But he *has* lost his confidence in the automatic power of the rational normativity of conversation to deliver us to that truth. It turns out, he thinks, that the normativity of talk, positive dialectic, does *not* reliably converge on the truth of the theory of Forms. Even well normatively-disciplined talk does not reliably converge on anything; and one way to read the *Theaetetus*, indeed, is as a rather rueful demonstration of that fact. Among other things, to be sure; but the very plurality of the points that the *Theaetetus* turns out to be making is yet further evidence of that same non-convergence again. Even the best normatively-disciplined talk is not such that engaging it will automatically lead us to converge on any conclusions at all. And so, in a decidedly fitting metaphor, the great hope with which Plato wrote every dialogue from the *Meno* to the *Republic* – goes up in smoke.

10

This leaves us with a split between the normativity of talk and the truth. Plato has by these difficult and daring routes reached a conclusion that to us is bound to have seemed obvious all along (and to him perhaps seemed very little less inevitable, however much he *wanted* his alternative to work out for him): that

outside the very special case of mathematics, it just is not to be expected that our discourse, be it never so rationally-governed, will automatically or reliably converge on the truth.

That is a setback for one kind of rational hope that not only an aristocrat like Plato, but also a democrat like me, might conceivably cherish: the hope that we might bring everyone round to believe the same truth, if only we could get our rational discourse sufficiently well-governed by the norms of talk. But as Plato reminds us by having Protagoras reproach Socrates for *adikein en logois*, even if that hope of securing universal agreement by rational coercion has been taken away from us, still three morals remain.

The first is that – as a matter of maintaining civilisation, and avoiding war: cp. my first two epigraphs – it remains enormously important to keep the norms of conversation in good health: to insist, with both Socrates in the *Apology* and Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, on the avoidance of trickery, violence, and magical rhetoric when one is trying to persuade someone; and to treat one's interlocutor with basic human respect. And indeed we might still hope for some more modest form of convergence than the *Meno* aims at: in particular, we might think that while the norms of talk do not channel us into *one unique* path of argument, they do rule out certain sorts of possibility that are well worth ruling out – in particular, those forms of discussion that are intrinsically violent and threatening.

Secondly, there is perhaps a lesson to be learned here about how there might be truth *without convergence*. It has seemed important to many thinkers, including recently Bernard Williams, to insist that if we arrive at the truth, then we must always arrive at the same truth. It clearly seems important to Plato in the *Republic* to insist on that, too. Indeed the *Republic* is perhaps the first and the clearest example in existence of a work of philosophy the point of which is (or is supposed to be) to use philosophical conversation to take us down what is, in the end, *the only line of thought that is available* – all others being false leads that "peter out into nothing", that are not in truth really lines of *thought* at all. The *Republic* shows us exactly what can be done with this ambition of rationally coerced rational convergence: and exactly what *can't* be done with it too. But of course, the clear and evident failure of this project to achieve its end – a failure which Plato in the *Republic* is *already admitting* when he has Socrates switch into metaphor at 506b–can seem like a dire threat to rationality and objectivity: if our only alternatives are rationally coerced convergence and rank irrationalist subjectivity, and if the prospect of rationally coerced convergence has proved to be a mirage, then where does that leave us?

We should not abandon either the idea of rationality or the idea of objectivity. But we should abandon the idea of convergence. The world is huge and

chancy – and complex; so perhaps it is possible for us to arrive at the truth, and yet *not* the same truth; and for this state of affairs to continue indefinitely. That is one reason, I think, why we should not accept Bernard Williams' idea that it is problematic for ethical objectivity that there is a lack of convergence in ethics on anything like an "absolute conception", in the way that there is in science. For it is not clear that there *is* convergence in science either. One way of developing this point is via the question "What might a thoroughly alien physics or mathematics look like? What if anything would it necessarily have in common with *our* physics or mathematics?" The answers seem to be, respectively, that we have no idea, and that there might not be very much at all in common between alien science and our science, beyond predictive and explanatory power. The universe is perhaps indefinitely fine-grained; and that is likely to mean that there are indefinitely many different explanatory schemata that can be true of it. If this is true in science, then perhaps it can be true elsewhere. But if it *is* true, then we should not be surprised – nor alarmed – by persistent disagreement; what we should do is respect our differences (more about Williams on the absolute conception and convergence in Chappell 2021).

For thirdly, above all, and this perhaps is the most important lesson of all that we should draw from the collapse of the *Meno*'s programme of positive dialectic, there is a lesson about humility to be learned. Others disagree with us; and of course they may simply be wrong. But they may also be seeing something that we have just failed to see. Especially if there can be truth without convergence, it is worth our while to keep talking to them; and to remind ourselves, frequently, that we are fallible too, and that even if we are right we might not be *comprehensively* right.

Conversational justice might then lead us in a quite different direction from the one that Plato envisages. It will not be a matter of rationally coercing others to converge on *our truth*. It may instead be a matter of recognising that there is an irreducible variety of ways of making sense of the world; and of accepting, in the light of that variety, that the most important rule of conversational justice of all is the one against *violence*. We can and should give a hearing to any sincere and good-faith attempt to make sense of the world, *provided it accepts the rule of conversational justice against violence*, either literal (thumping people) or rhetorical (browbeating or bewitching or hypnotising or threatening them). We cannot know in advance that others are wrong and we are right; we cannot be sure, therefore, that there is *one* conversational republic that we will converge on, nor that that republic or republics will be anything like the highly authoritarian rational regime that Plato envisaged. Conversational justice will seek both rationality and objectivity; but because it does not require the truth that we aim at to be single, and because it recognises

the unfathomable complexity of reality, it can allow me to think that others might be right without reducing both me and them to relativistic paralysis; for it need not require *convergence*.

And of Plato's over-ambitious ideal of a form of conversation such that its form uniquely and completely rationally dictates its content, this at least will remain: there is at any rate one way in which the form of a shared conversation in a civic society *does* dictate its content, namely by excluding appeals and incitements to violence, and threats of violence. That is a substantial and important exclusion; it means, for example, that there is no room in a conversational republic for a supposed form of ethical or political insight that mandates us to treat fellow citizens with violence or threat or anything less than the equal respect for all that is involved in a conversationally just dialogue. It is, of course, not the everything that Plato apparently hoped for. But it is not nothing either. Civic discourse need not be convergent discourse; but it must be *civil* discourse. And to those of us who are both liberals – believers that humanity's best qualities can only be realised under conditions of political freedom – and humanists – believers that humanity *has* good and even irreplaceably precious qualities – civility is always bound to be a lot more than nothing.

The ultimate aim is not, as in Plato, just one conversational republic, just one single uniquely rationally-mandated way for things to be, compared with which all other ways for them to be are by definition *wrong*. The aim is, rather, any of a whole variety of possible conversational republics. And here "republic" means what it means in modern political philosophy – a society characterised by the citizens' mutual *non-domination* (see PETTIT 2000).

Thinking about things this way may be a good way to make ourselves *modest* in discussion, as David Hume reminds us toward the end of the *Enquiry* (Part 3, section 129). It may also be a good way to make ourselves *gentle* in discussion, as Plato reminds us we need to be at the close of the *Theaetetus*. And in the process of becoming both modest and gentle, there need be no concession at all (*pace* Hume) to relativism or irrationalism; for as above, what we have rejected is not objectivity or rationality. It is convergence.

To Socrates' good advice, in closing, I thus commend the reader (*Theaet.* 210b–d):

> So, Theaetetus, if after this you ever take in hand the business of intellectual pregnancy, and if you conceive, then you will be pregnant with better ideas thanks to the present inquiry; whereas if you are not pregnant but empty, you will not be so heavy on your companions, and will be more temperately gentle to them, because you do not imagine that you know what you do not know. For this is all my midwifery can do; nothing more.

> I do not know anything about what other experts know, such great and wonderful men as there are and have been; this maieutic art is what my mother and I were allotted by god – to her midwifery of women, to me midwifery of noble young men who are beautiful.
>
> *Theaet.* 210b–d

Acknowledgments

My thanks for helpful comments and criticism to Sarah Broadie, Jason Carter, Manlio Fossati, Alex Long, M.M. McCabe, Basil O'Neill, Barbara Sattler, and Diego Zucca.

References

ANSCOMBE, E. (1963). *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Hutchinson's. London.

AUSTIN, J.L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Clarendon. Oxford.

BERNECKER, S.; MICHAELIAN, K. (eds.) (2017). *Handbook to the Philosophy of Memory*. Routledge. London.

CHAPPELL, S.G. (2020). Review of C. DIAMOND, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe*. *Ethics*, July, pp. 588–608.

CHAPPELL, S.G. (2021). Bernard Williams' Liberal Naturalism. In: MACARTHUR, D.; DE CARO, M. (eds.). *The Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*. Routledge. London.

DIAMOND, C. (2019). *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge Mass.

GRICE, PAUL. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge Mass.

LE GUIN, U. (1969). *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Ace Books. New York.

PETTIT, PH. (2000). *Republicanism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

SCHAMA, S. (2000). *Belonging: A History of the Jews, Volume II*. Bodley Head. London. 2017.

TOLSTOY, L. *Anna Karenina* (1954=1876). Tr. Rosemary Edmonds. Penguin Classics. London.

TRIVIGNO, F. (2009). The Rhetoric of Parody in Plato's *Menexenus*. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2009), pp. 29–58.

WOODHEAD, A.G. (1960). Thucydides' portrait of Cleon. *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, Vol. 13, Fasc. 4, pp. 289–317.

SECTION 2

Relativism between Ontology and Epistemology

CHAPTER 5

Protagoras' Secret Doctrine: *Theaetetus* 152a–157c. Relativism, Indeterminacy and Ineffability

Ugo Zilioli

In the paper I shall reconstruct the main features of Protagoras' relativism as this is illustrated in a core section of the first part of Plato's *Theaetetus* (152a–157c). More in particular, I will try to bring out the main metaphysical, semantic and epistemological views that Plato sees as arising from Protagoras' Secret Doctrine. The scope of the paper is mainly explanatory (from the point of view of the textual arguments presented in the *Theaetetus*) and elucidatory (from a more theoretical point of view). I claim, in fact, that while the *Theaetetus* has been of much interest for historians of philosophy and philosophers alike, the full philosophical importance and scope of the theories arising from Protagoras' Secret Doctrine haven't so far been appreciated, as they should indeed be.[1] This lack of appreciation is particularly despicable in light of the large amount of fine scholarship on the *Theaetetus*, one of Plato's most read dialogues. It also puts us in the condition of not being able to fully appreciate the philosophical sophistication of the Protagorean theories Plato discusses at *Theaet.* 152a–157c. These theories are, I submit, of the highest originality and they can also be of relevance for contemporary debates in metaphysics and in the history of ideas.

1 Protagoras' Relativism and the Secret Doctrine

In the *Theaetetus* we find the first important affirmation of relativism in the history of Western thought. Theaetetus' initial definition that knowledge is perception is immediately equated by Socrates with Protagoras' doctrine that Man is the Measure of All Things: «Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not» (*Theaet.* 152a3–5).[2] Protagoras' Maxim, which is said to have been the opening

1 Three notable exceptions are BRANCACCI (2011); THALER (2013); BUCKELS (2016). See also DAY (1997).

2 As for the *Theaetetus*, I mainly use the translation by Christopher Rowe (ROWE 2015).

statement of Protagoras' *Truth*, has so far received many alternative readings.[3] Plato's Socrates gives his own interpretation of it at the very beginning of the first section of the *Theaetetus* (151e–186a), namely the section where Theaetetus' first definition of knowledge as perception is put under intense scrutiny. According to Socrates, with his almost oracular wording Protagoras' Maxim alludes to a form of relativism that is mainly perceptual but that also has an ontological commitment. In Socrates' opinion, with his maxim that Man is the Measure of All Things Protagoras aims to suggest that all perceptions are legitimate, in so far as they are all relative to the single percipient. If two people feel a blowing wind and one of them feels it as cold and the other as not cold, Protagoras will be happy to say that «the wind is cold for the person who is shivering, and not for the person who isn't» (*Theaet.* 152b8–9). If each thing is as each of us perceives it to be, all perceptions will be true for each of us, individually taken.

Among the conflicting appearances arising when different people perceive an object, there is no perception that is uniquely correct, against all the others being mistaken: for Protagoras each perception is true because each perception is relative to a perceiver. It cannot be otherwise, since there is no reality out there independently of how we perceive it. This being the case, Theaetetus' definition that knowledge is perception is indeed true for Protagoras. As Socrates sums up: «A thing's appearing to someone, then, is the same as his perceiving it, in the case of hot things and of everything like that. For how each of us perceives a thing is likely also to be how it is for each of us» (*Theaet.* 152c1–3); «as befits knowledge, then, perception is always of what is, and never plays us false» (c5–6).

I am not concerned here whether the way Socrates takes Protagoras' Maxim in the *Theaetetus* is the actual way in which Protagoras intended his Maxim to be taken (myself thinking that in dealing with Protagoras, despite some inevitable intrusions on his part, Plato displays a quite respectable level of historical accuracy).[4] Whether he is trustworthy or not as a Protagorean exegete, Plato's Socrates is in any case well aware that his reading of Protagoras' Maxim as a form of relativism raises a vast array of philosophical questions that soon need to be addressed, since his very first handling of Protagoras' relativism, while being illuminating, leaves out more than what it actually reveals.

3 For a reconstruction of Protagoras' views in Plato, see ZILIOLI (2006); for an exhaustive treatment of Protagoras in Aristotle's works, both in philosophical and historical terms, with full reference to the extensive scholarship on the topic, see CORRADI (2012).

4 I have addressed the problem in ZILIOLI (2016).

Socrates soon remarks that, in order to get its full meaning, Protagoras' relativism is to be read in conjunction with a Secret Doctrine of his, more literally a doctrine that Protagoras «revealed to his disciples in secret».[5] As we have briefly seen, Socrates' reading of Protagoras Maxim provides us with a form of relativism that closely links perceptions to ontology, that is, to the actual way material things are supposed to be. Ontological concerns are central in Protagoras' Secret Doctrine too, this doctrine being initially built upon two interrelated views, one metaphysical, and the other semantic:

> I will tell you a theory that certainly ought not to be written off. It's to the effect that actually nothing is just one thing, itself by itself, and that you cannot refer to a thing correctly by any description whatever (ὡς ἄρα ἓν μὲν αὐτὸ καθ᾽ αὑτὸ οὐδέν ἐστιν, οὐδ᾽ ἄν τι προσείποις ὀρθῶς οὐδ᾽ ὁποιονοῦν τι). If you call something big, it will appear as small as well, and if you call it heavy, it will appear as light too; and similarly with everything, just because – so the theory says – nothing is one, whether a one something or a one any sort of thing (ὡς μηδενὸς ὄντος ἑνὸς μήτε τινὸς μήτε ὁποιουοῦν).
> *Theaet.* 152d2–8

The metaphysical view at the kernel of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is that nothing is just one thing, itself by itself. That is, «nothing is one, whether a one something or one any sort of thing». These are actually two distinct metaphysical views, closely interrelated but also different views. The first, stronger view is that no material item is one determinate thing. I shall label this view as "strong indeterminacy": things in the material world are ontologically indeterminate, in so far as no material item is one determinate thing. The second, milder metaphysical view central to Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is that no material item is attributed a determinate secondary quality. I shall label this view as "mild indeterminacy", since it attaches indeterminacy to specific properties of material items, not to things in themselves. Mild indeterminacy simply prescribes that no one thing is determinately one way or the other: the wind in Socrates' example is in itself neither cold nor hot (at 152b4–5). On the other hand, strong indeterminacy proposes a quite challenging, more radical view: nothing is one determinate thing in itself. Obviously enough, if the existence-predicate is understood as a standard predicate, from mild indeterminacy we shall easily get strong indeterminacy; in detailing the metaphysical core of

5 *Theaet.* 152c10: «Has he given us this as a riddle for the common riff-raff, while revealing the Truth to his disciples in secret? (*tois de mathêtais en aporrêtôi tên alêtheian elegen*)».

Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, however, Socrates often conflates strong and mild indeterminacy.[6]

In addition to these quite original metaphysical views, Protagoras' Secret doctrine contains a semantic view, which, as I take it, grows out – and builds upon – the metaphysical views just illustrated: if nothing is one thing or is determinately qualified in one way or the other, you cannot refer to such a thing correctly by any description whatsoever. As Socrates says: «If you call something big, it will appear as small as well, and if you call it heavy, it will appear as light too; and similarly with everything». As far as the semantic thesis is concerned, the emphasis in Socrates' words is put at first on the actual linkage between semantic interchangeability and mild indeterminacy: that is, what is going to be termed as "large" now will be attributed the property of smallness at a later stage and, hence, will be called as "small" by then. On the other hand, it will be soon obvious that Plato intends semantic ineffability to be applied to thing in themselves too, not only to properties of things.[7] Proper names will not be able to name the very thing that they are supposed to name. What is going to be threatened, in the very context of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is the semantic linkage between a thing and its proper name, that is, the very same linkage that ultimately provides meaningfulness to the words we use.[8]

The two metaphysical views about indeterminacy and the related semantic view of ineffability would already constitute a quite original family of doctrines, but Plato is not fully satisfied and adds a fourth important element in Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, namely flux. On the basis of the story Socrates tells Theaetetus, the metaphysical view and its semantic counterpart have a deeper origin in the theory of flux: nothing is one thing and cannot properly be referred to with any description whatsoever *because*

6 For strong and mild indeterminacy, see ROSEN/SMITH (2004) and *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* 6 (2011), with papers by E. Barnes and R. Williams (*A Theory of Metaphysical Indeterminacy*), M. Eklund (*Being Metaphysically Unsettled*) and R. Woodward (*Metaphysical Indeterminacy and Vague Existence*).

7 See *Theaet*. 157c1–2, and below, section 4.

8 There is here a close parallelism to be drawn between the problem of reference as raised in Protagoras' Secret Doctrine and similar problems raised by Socrates' Dream in the last part of the dialogue, on which see recently CHAPPELL (2020). Again, I don't think that this parallelism has been investigated with the attention it does deserve. See SEDLEY (2004), pp. 150–68 for the suggestion that Parts I and III of the *Theaetetus* are more linked that what it appears at first sight.

> All things are in the process of coming to be through motion, and change in general, and mixture with each other; nothing ever is, it's always coming to be.
>
> *Theaet.* 152d8–e1

As far as I can see, then, Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is a quite elaborated theory. Its core are two interrelated metaphysical theses about indeterminacy, which have a semantic consequence: the ineffability of things and of the properties we usually attach to things. The origin of indeterminacy is flux. Things cannot be determinate entities and cannot have determinate properties because everything is in flux. Nothing is because everything is coming to be.

2 A New Theory of Perception: Stage One (*Theaet.* 153d8–154b9)

In dealing with Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, we are thus confronted with a rather original mix of philosophical views. What sort of philosophical gain is one expected to get when Protagoras' initial profession of relativism is conjoined with his Secret Doctrine? We have seen that Protagoras' relativism, as Socrates interprets it, is mainly an epistemological thesis that also has a quite clear ontological commitment: things are as we perceive them to be. In Protagoras' view, there is no real wind, but a family of blowing winds relative to each perceiver. On the other hand, Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is made up by metaphysical and semantic views, while it lacks, at least *prima facie*, any epistemological concern. What is, after all, the epistemological gain for Protagoras' relativism when his Secret Doctrine is brought into the picture?

In order to help answer the question, Socrates is keen to offer Theaetetus a further explanation aimed to show how Protagoras' relativistic epistemology is actually enriched by the contribution of his Secret Doctrine. Socrates splits this explanation in two parts, one more preliminary at *Theaet.* 153d8–154b10, the other more informative at *Theaet.* 156a3–157c5 (when the doctrine of the subtler thinkers makes its appearance). Let us label these two parts of Socrates' further explanation as, respectively, "Stage One" and "Stage Two" explanation.

In Stage One, Socrates shows Theaetetus how to locate Protagoras' Secret Doctrine in the context of his relativism. He does so by detailing the first rudiments of a quite peculiar theory of perception:

> Socrates: The best way to think of that theory [sc. The Secret Doctrine], my friend, is this. In the case of the eyes, first of all, you shouldn't think of what you call white colour as some other thing outside your eyes, or

> within the eyes, and neither should you assign it some particular location; if you do, it will surely then be fixed and resting, and come to be no longer in the process of coming to be.
>
> *Theaet.* 153d8-e-3

> Let us follow out what we were saying just now, and posit nothing that is just one thing, itself by itself. That way we'll find that black or white or any colour you like must have been generated from the eyes' meeting the relevant motion, and that we actually call colour in each case won't be either what is doing the striking or what is being struck, but rather something that has come to be in between the two, peculiar to each. Or would you prefer to insist that as each colour appears to you, so it appears to a dog or whatever other living creature too?
>
> *Theaet.* 153e4–154a4

> What about another human being? Does the way anything appears to someone else match the way it appears to you? Are you sure about that? Aren't you much surer that it won't appear the same to you because you yourself won't ever be the same as yourself?
>
> *Theaet.* 154a6–9

Protagoras' epistemological relativism appears to get a new meaning when it is interpreted under the constraints of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine. We have seen that the core metaphysical view of the Secret Doctrine is that nothing is one thing, itself by itself. On the basis of Socrates' own words, I have given two different versions of this view: either no material item is one determinate thing (strong indeterminacy) or no material item is attributed a determinate secondary property (mild indeterminacy).

Both versions of indeterminacy are well present in the development of the theory of perception Socrates illustrates to Theaetetus at Stage One. As for mild indeterminacy, no material item is attributed a determinate property, such as a colour, because, in the actual context of the perceptual theory Socrates is developing out of the Secret Doctrine, any given colour is understood as the result of the eyes meeting the relevant motion of perception. More precisely, in the world of perennial flux that is the ultimate *rasion d'etre* of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, the perceived colour is to be taken as the result of the process of interaction between what is being struck on the one hand and what does the striking on the other. This being the case, each colour becomes relative to a single act of perceiving and, consequently, relative to a sole and unique percipient. Only when it is correctly linked with the main metaphysical views

illustrated in the Secret Doctrine, Protagoras' relativism is offered a wider application and, consequently, a stronger philosophical appeal. It is only in the context of the Secret Doctrine that Protagoras' relativism will show its full potential by sketching a quite peculiar theory of relative perception. For Protagoras, perceptions are relative to the single percipient exactly because the individual percipient, at the very moment when perception takes place, gets involved with the perceived object. In the temporary contact between what is being perceived and who does the perceiving, perception arises as something peculiar to each of them, that is, to the individual percipient as well as to the perceived object.[9]

Perception is thus relative in so far as it provides a temporary epistemological linkage between the two poles interacting in the perceptual process, namely the perceived object on the one hand, and the individual percipient on the other. Although Socrates' wider understanding of Protagoras' relativism offers us a quite peculiar theory of perception, the story is not yet complete because strong indeterminacy is now fully back in the picture: the two poles of the perceptual processes are no one thing in themselves. Socrates asks Theaetetus:

> What about another human being? Does the way anything appears to someone else match the way it appears to you? Are you sure about that? Aren't you much surer that it won't appear the same to you because you yourself won't ever be the same as yourself?
>
> *Theaet.* 154a6–9

On the ground of strong indeterminacy, the individual percipient is thus no one thing, ontologically stable and determinate. His identity keeps changing over time. This is a further reason that makes Protagoras' relativism even more radical: since the individual percipient is not the same person over time, the way things appear to him are not only relative to him but also relative to him *at the very moment when perception takes place*. What appears white to him now may appear grey to him within an hour because within an hour he will not be the same person he is now.

9 I need to praise Rowe's translation here. He ameliorates the Levett/Burnyeat's (Hackett 1998) on a crucial point; at *Theaet.* 154 a2 the expression (as referred to colour) «*alla metaxu ti hekastôi idion gegonos*» is to be translated as «something that has come to be in between the two, peculiar to each one» (that is, to the percipient and the perceived object), and not as «something which has come into being between the two, and which is private to the individual percipient», a translation that obliterates the correlativity that is at the root of the theory of perception Socrates is illustrating.

3 A New Theory of Perception: Stage Two (the Subtler Thinkers: *Theaet.* 156a–157c)

By means of Socrates' midwifery, we have learned that, in order to be fully appreciated, Protagoras' relativism is to be read in conjunction with his Secret doctrine. We have also learned how that relativism is to be developed into a peculiar theory of perception to show its full philosophical implications. Socrates has illustrated the new interpretation of Protagoras' relativism in one preliminary stage, that is, at Stage One. There are, however, other aspects to be clarified, and other questions to be asked, as far as Protagorean theories are concerned. What has happened to the semantic aspect of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine? There is no mention of it in Socrates' Stage One explanation. At the same time, while it tells us very clearly the metaphysical status of perceiving subjects, as well as showing how perceptions arise in the perceptual process, Socrates' Stage One explanation does not spell out the metaphysical status of material things in that very process. We have just seen that the perceiving subject is not one determinate thing: what about perceived objects? Are they ontologically unstable/indeterminate as well? If so, how unstable/indeterminate are they?

In order to clarify these important aspects of Protagoras' theories, Socrates gives us what I have labelled a Stage Two explanation. Socrates provides the second, deeper explanation at *Theaet.* 156a3–157c5, where he illustrates a theory of perception whose paternity is to be attributed to some subtler thinkers.[10] For our own purposes in the present paper the question of the identity of the subtler thinkers is not important. The natural way to take the theory of perception of the subtler thinkers is to understand it as a more elaborate version of the theory of perception that Socrates has already illustrated at *Theaet.* 153d8–154a9, that is, at Stage One. If this is the case, the more refined – perhaps the "subtler" (to use Plato's own word) – theory of perception we are just about to read will be understood as a further development of Protagoras' relativism. What does the more refined version of the subtler thinkers' theory of perception add to Protagoras' theory of perception as this is illustrated at *Theaet.* 153d8–154a9? In other words, how is Stage Two related to Stage One?

10 Much has been written on these thinkers; myself arguing that they are likely to be Aristippus and the early Cyrenaics: ZILIOLI (2014), Chapter 2. I believe a serious case can be made to show that Plato thinks the Cyrenaics as Protagoras' best heirs at his (Plato's) time. Tsouna provides the best case I am aware of to deny this identification: TSOUNA (1998), Chapter 10; Rowe adopts a third way to the extent that he bypasses the problem of the identity of the subtler thinkers while suggesting that there are surely Cyrenaic traces in the *Theaetetus*: ROWE (2015).

Does the new, more refined version fill in the philosophical gaps already noted, as well as answering the questions we have asked about the ontological status of perceived objects?

When he illustrates the first details of the theory of perception of the subtler thinkers, Socrates makes clear that the new version of the theory strictly adheres to the idea that "everything is change and there is nothing beside change" (*Theaet.* 156a5); he also remarks that the new version of the theory is, as it was in the case of the Secret Doctrine, a doctrine for initiated people. As soon as he has highlighted the centrality of flux and change in the theory of the subtler thinkers, Socrates immediately says that there are two forms of change, each one with different capacities:

> Of change there were two forms, each unlimited in plurality but with different powers, one to act, the other to be acted upon. From the coming together of these two motions, and the friction of one against the other, offspring come into being – unlimited number of them, but twins in every case, one twin being what is perceived, the other a perception, emerging simultaneously with what is perceived and being generated along with it. Well, for the perceptions we possess names such a seeing, hearing, smelling, cooling down, or burning up, ones we call pleasures and pains, too, desires and fears, and others besides – an unlimited number that lack names as well as a huge range that are named.
>
> *Theaet.* 156a6–b7

The key aspect of the subtler thinkers' theory of perception is that, everything being in flux, there are two kinds of motion, unlimited in numbers, with opposite powers. From the coming together and the friction of these two motions with opposite powers, offspring comes into being as twins: on the one hand, there is the perception, on the other what is being perceived.

After this, Socrates is immediately keen to show the conceptual relationship between the new, more refined version of the theory of perception and the less sophisticated version of it, namely the one developed briefly at Stage One.[11] In addition to specifying that motions can be quick and slow, Socrates offers the following picture as evidence as to how the perceptual process actually takes place in the world of the subtler thinkers:

11 «So Theaetetus, what is this story telling us, in relation to what we were saying before? ... Well, see if we can somehow round the story off» (*Theaet.* 156c7–8).

> So when something commensurate with an eye has come into the neighbourhood of an eye, together the eye and it generate both whiteness and a perception twinned with whiteness – two things that would never come to be if either the eye or the other thing has approached anything else. Sight then moves between them from the eyes, whiteness from the co-producer of the colour, and now – hey presto – the eye is full of sight; now it sees, having become, certainly not sight, rather a seeing eye, and what has co-generated the colour has been filled full of whiteness, having become for its part not whiteness but white, whether a white piece of wood or a white stone or whatever thing happened to have become coloured with this sort of colour.
>
> *Theaet.* 156d3–e8

This is a striking account of perception, and one that is perfectly able to explain how the twin-offspring comes into proper birth: perception (of white in the example Socrates makes) is seen as arising from the temporary and accidental encounter between the proper sense-organ (the seeing eye) and the perceived "object" (although the term "object" shouldn't be used, as we will see shortly), which appears to be white on the occasion. It is worth noting that in such a picture of the perceptual process, there is no explicit reference to the role of the perceiving subject, which is reduced to his sense-organs (while in the less sophisticated version of the theory of perception illustrated at Stage One the emphasis was indeed on the subject performing the perceptual activity).

Socrates makes the example of visual perception but he remarks that what he has just said applies to all kinds of perceptions, because «nothing is, itself by itself, as we were saying before; rather, it is in coming together with each other that all things and all sorts of things come to be, from their changing» (*Theaet.* 157a1–3). The picture is made even more radical by the fact that

> […] it is not possible to get a stable fix, in the one case, even on which of them is doing the acting and which is being acted upon, for neither is there anything acting before it comes together with what is acted on, nor anything being acted on before it comes together with what is acting; and what does the acting when together with one thing turns out to be what is acted on when together with something else.
>
> *Theaet.* 157a3–9

The main features of the theory of perception of the subtler thinkers confirm how it should be seen as a more sophisticated development of the theory of perception illustrated by Socrates at Stage One: movement and change are

now understood as having two different powers. Perception on the one hand, and what is perceived on the other are to be seen as twins originating from the temporary encounter of two elements that are in perennial process of changing and that are on some occasions acted on, on others acting on.

As a way of conclusion Socrates stresses the conceptual linkage between the theory of perception of the subtler thinkers and Protagoras' Secret Doctrine:

> The consequence of all this, according to the theory, is that nothing – as we were saying at the beginning – is just one thing, itself by itself, but instead is always coming to be in relation to something. The verb "is" must be removed from every context, even though we ourselves have been forced to use it many times over even just now, out of habit and lack of knowledge. In fact, according to these wise people's theory, we shouldn't consent to using "something", or "somebody's", or "mine", or "this", or "that", or any other name that brings things to a standstill. Instead our utterances should conform to nature and have things "coming to be", "being made", "passing away", and "altering" (…). The rule applies to talk about the individual case and about many collected together, the sort of collection for which people posit entities like human being, and rock, and so on with each living creature and form.
>
> *Theaet.* 157a9–c2

Earlier we have seen that the explanation Socrates gives at Stage One (to show how Protagoras' relativism is to be understood properly only when taken together with his Secret Doctrine) was in need of further specifications. Socrates' Stage Two explanation, namely the theory of perception developed by the subtler thinkers at *Theaet.* 156a3ff., provides us with important clarifications about movement, change, and perceptual processes. It also tells us more about the two points left behind in Stage One explanation, that is, the ontological status of perceived objects and the problem of semantic ineffability. By reading Socrates' Stage Two explanation, we are now aware that not only perceiving subjects but also objects of perceptions are ontologically indeterminate. Their identity is ontologically unstable, since everything keeps flowing and changing all the time and in all respects. Indeed, and strictly speaking, there are neither actual objects nor real subjects in the perceptual process. As Socrates remarks, there are no rocks and no human being there. Because of the absence of ontological determinacy, we are caught in the trap of semantic ineffability: we cannot name material things because there is, properly speaking, nothing there to be named. The referential linkage between a thing and its proper name is broken, because there is no proper thing there to be named.

Our language should be fully replaced by another language, more capable to capture the fluidity of matter.

4 The Secret Doctrine and the New Theory of Perception: Viable Theories?

Protagoras' relativism has travelled much, from its very first appearance in the dialogue at *Theaet*. 152a to its final re-interpretation at *Theaet*. 156a–157c (Stage Two explanation) via the intermediate steps of the Secret Doctrine and Socrates' Stage One explanation. The actual combination of Protagoras' relativism with his Secret Doctrine has produced a quite peculiar theory of perception, which Socrates illustrates in two stages. The four philosophical views that are at the core of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine are fully present in the theory of perception Socrates illustrates at Stage Two. These four views dealt with in the Secret Doctrine section, it may be worth repeating, are the following ones: 1) nothing has one determinate property (mild indeterminacy); 2) nothing is one thing, itself by itself (strong indeterminacy); 3) semantic ineffability: you cannot refer to a thing correctly by any description; 4) everything is in flux.

In the theory of perception illustrated at Stage Two, we find the following claims: 1) nothing has one determinate property: the property of "whiteness" does not belong permanently and determinately to a rock now appearing white to me because the rock appearing white to me now as well as and my perception of white are the twin-birth of a process soon to be terminated. 2) Nothing is one thing in itself by itself: either what is being perceived and who does the perceiving are not, strictly speaking, material items with an enduring identity over time. There are no material items in the world, since everything is a motion and everything is in motion. What we perceive as stable material items such as rocks and human beings are simply motions or processes with a slightly longer durability. 3) The world being deprived of material items with an enduring stability over time, and everything being in perennial flux, we can't use proper names to name things in the world, since there are no things to be named. 4) The world is thus a world of processes and interactions, a world of motion, changing and flux with no residual ontological stability.

It is only in this picture that Protagoras' relativism gets its full significance. Since everything is in flux and is motion; since there are no proper material items in the world apart from processes and interactions, perception can only be seen as the temporary product of the causal encounter between the sense-organs and what is being perceived. If this is the case, perception will only be

relative to the subject carrying out the perceptual activity, at the very moment when perception takes place.

Together with the initial definition of knowledge as perception (*Theaet.* 151e4–6) and with Heraclitus' flux-theory, Protagoras' relativism is part of Theaetetus' first child, that is, part of the first sustained effort Theaetetus makes to understand what knowledge is.[12] A common way (labelled as Reading B by Myles Burnyeat in *The Theaetetus of Plato*, 1998)[13] to read the first section of the *Theaetetus* is to take it as a *reductio ad absurdum*: the thesis that knowledge is perception (KP) entails Protagoras' relativism (R), which, in turn, entails Heraclitus' theory of flux (H), which is ultimately unacceptable because it makes language impossible. While Reading B has surely some exegetical strength, I don't think it is a fair way to understand the overall logic of *Theaetetus* 151e–186a. In dealing with the three main views that are at the core of the first part of Plato's *Theaetetus* (namely KP, R and H), Plato is confronted with other doctrines that arise, or are conceptually closely linked, with the three main ones on stage. That is, while dealing with Protagoras' relativism, we have been confronted with Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, which itself is built upon four relevant views, only one of which (namely H) is going to receive a fuller treatment by Plato later in the dialogue.

In *Theaetetus* 151e–186a, Plato offers three main types of refutation: Protagoras' relativism (at *Theaet.* 170–171, with a further refutation at *Theaet.* 177c5–179b of a modified version of Protagoras' relativism as this is further developed at *Theaet.* 166a–168c5); the thesis that knowledge is perception (at *Theaet.* 184b–186e); Heraclitus' flux-theory (at *Theaet.* 181c–183c). That is, in the first section of the *Theaetetus* Plato provides important attempts to refute the three main philosophical theses that are being discussed at *Theaet.* 151e–186a: KP, R and H. Nowhere in the *Theaetetus* will one find Plato trying to argue directly against some corollary views, such as Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, which in the economy of the dialogue is seen as arising from the thread of the main philosophical discussion brought forward by Socrates, Theaetetus and the mathematician from Cyrene, Theodorus. More in particular, one of the

12 Socrates to Theaetetus: «In that case it was quite right for you to say that knowledge was nothing else but perception. Everything has come together – the view of Homer and Heraclitus and the whole of that sort of tribe, that all things change like rivers; that idea of Protagoras, too, paragon of wisdom, that the measure of all things is a human being; and now Theaetetus' proposal, that if all that is so, perception turns out to be knowledge. How about it, Theaetetus? Shall we claim this as your new-born baby, as it were, delivered by me as midwife?» (*Theaet.* 160d5–e4).

13 BURNYEAT (1998), pp. 7–10.

three main theses under scrutiny in the first part of the dialogue (that is, H) is going to be tentatively refuted by Plato at *Theaet.* 181c–183c but not in itself but because, according to Plato, its adoption will ultimately lead to the impossibility of language.

In the *Theaetetus* there is therefore no refutation, either direct or indirect, of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine and of the main views around which it is built; in addition, there is no refutation too of the theory of perception that is the main outcome of Protagoras' relativism and his Secret Doctrine. This lack of refutation makes the proposers of Reading A (that is, the interpretation of *Theaet.* 151e–186a as alternative to Reading B) suggest that Plato himself conceives of the theory of perception arising from the combination of Protagoras' relativism and his Secret Doctrine as a viable perceptual theory.[14] Of course, on the basis of Reading A, Plato does not believe that perception is knowledge; yet, he thinks that the account of perception developed by Protagoras and the subtler thinkers may be showing how perception, although leading nowhere epistemologically for Plato, could in principle work.

Is the theory of perception developed out of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine a credible epistemological and metaphysical outlook of the material world? Most commentators of the *Theaetetus* adopt Burnyeat's Reading B and thus, wrongly, dismiss all the views arising from the discussion of Protagoras' relativism as incoherent and refuted by Plato's later arguments. Even those interpreters who adopt Reading A don't spend much of their time in defending the philosophical plausibility of the views illustrated in Protagoras' Secret Doctrine. These views, after all, seem quite implausible: they are in sharp contrast with some of our commonsensical assumptions about material objects. But these approaches are wrong, I think. The views about things and persons that are at the core of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine are very original views that some scholars have recently shown to be widely debated in ancient philosophy. In his ground-breaking work on Pyrrho, Richard Bett has for instance successfully claimed that the section of the *Theaetetus* under major scrutiny in this paper was truly inspirational for Pyrrho's indeterminacy thesis, namely the view that reality is ontologically indeterminate.[15] Contrary to what Bett believes, I think that part of the discussion about the opponents of the Principle of Non-Contradiction that Aristotle develops in *Metaphysics* 4 does refer back to the *Theaetetus* itself and to the indeterminacy thesis that I have been claiming is at the root of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine.[16]

---

14 See CORNFORD (1935), pp. 45–58 and CHAPPELL (2005), pp. 49–63.

15 See BETT (1999), 132–40.

16 See BETT (1999), 123–131; *contra* ZILIOLI (2013).

Recent comparative studies have also shown how Pyrrho and Buddha may have shared similar theoretical commitments, hence linking more closely Eastern and Western philosophical traditions.[17] This could help us understand how and why the views about persons and material objects that we see as central in Protagoras' Secret Doctrine have a prominent place in Indian Buddhist philosophy; closer analogies between these views and current discussions in analytic metaphysics are to be highlighted too.[18]

Part of the original aim of this paper was to bring out more clearly the affinities between the metaphysics of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, Buddhist eliminativism about persons and objects and contemporary analytic nihilism. But the actual effort to elucidate the philosophical kernel of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine has now taken the whole paper. I aim to get back to a comparative approach on another occasion. Yet, I hope that the very elucidation of the main views of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine has shown once again the philosophical appeal that even less discussed sections of the *Theaetetus* can have for historians of philosophy and for philosophers alike.[19]

References

BECKWITH, Ch. (2017). *Greek Buddha. Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.

BENNETT, K. and D. ZIMMERMANN, D.V. (eds.) (2011). *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 6.

BENOVSKY, J. (2019). *Eliminativism, Objects, and Persons: The Virtues of Non-Existence*. Routledge. New York and London.

BRANCACCI, A. (2011). La dottrina riservata di Protagora (Plat. *Theaetet*. 152c7–e1). *Methexis*, 24, pp. 87–108.

BUCKELS, C. (2016). The Ontology of the Secret Doctrine in Plato's *Theaeteus*. *Phronesis*, 61 (3), pp. 243–259.

BURNYEAT, F.M. (1998). *The Theaetetus of Plato*. Hackett. Indianapolis.

17 See BECKWITH (2017) and KUZMINSKI (2021).

18 On Buddhist eliminativism, see WESTERHOFF (2020); on analytic nihilism, see VAN INWAGEN (1994); MERRICKS (2001); BERENOVSKY (2019).

19 I wish to thank Diego Zucca for his kind invitation to participate to this important collection and for his generous patience and support. An ancestor of this paper was read at a Conference on relativity organized by Matt Duncombe at Durham University in 2016. I thank him, Voula Tsouna and Katerina Ierodiakonou for their helpful comments. This paper has been written under the auspices of a Leverhulme Research Grant (RPG-2021-204). I thank the Trust for its generous support.

CASTAGNOLI, L. (2010). *Ancient Self-Refutation*, Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass.

CHAPPELL, T. (2005). Reading Plato's *Theaetetus*. Hackett. Indianapolis.

CHAPPELL, S.G. (2020). Atoms, Complexes and Simples in the *Theaetetus*, in ZILIOLI, U. (ed.), *Atomism in Philosophy*. Bloomsbury. London and New York, pp. 112–136.

CORNFORD, F.M. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London.

CORRADI, M. (2012). *Protagora tra filologia e filosofia*. Fabrizio Serra Editore. Roma-Pisa.

DAY, J. (1997). The Theory of Perception in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 15, pp. 51–80.

KUZMINSKI, A. (2021). *Pyrrhonian Buddhism. A philosophical reconstruction*, New York and London. Routledge.

MERRICKS, T. (2001). *Objects and Persons*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

ROSEN, G.; SMITH, J.J. (2004). Worldly Indeterminacy: a rough guide. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 82, pp. 185–98.

ROWE, C. (2015). *The Theaetetus and Sophist*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass.

ROWE, C. (2015). The First-generation Socratics and the Socratic Schools: The case of the Cyrenaics. In: ZILIOLI (2015), pp. 47–62.

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

THALER, N. (2013). Plato on the Importance of 'This' and 'That': The theory of Flux and Its refutation in the *Theaetetus*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 45, pp. 1–42.

TSOUNA, V. (1998). *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass.

VAN INWAGEN, P. (1994). *Material Beings*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca – New York.

WESTERHOFF, J. (2020). *The Non-Existence of the Real World*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

ZILIOLI, U. (2013). Protagoras through Plato and Aristotle, in J.M. Ophuijsen, M. van Raalte, P. Stork (eds.), *Protagoras of Abdera. The Man, His Measure*. Brill. Leiden, pp. 233–258.

ZILIOLI, U. (2014). *The Cyrenaics*. Routledge. New York and London.

ZILIOLI, U. (ed.). (2015). *From the Socratics to the Socratic Schools*. Routledge. New York and London, pp. 26–41.

ZILIOLI, U. (2016). *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism*. Routledge. New York and London.

CHAPTER 6

Plato, *Theaetetus* 169e8–171c7: The Self-Refutation Argument and What Protagoras Is Right About

Diego Zucca

1 Putting the Self-Refutation Argument in Context

Theaetetus's first "baby" is the idea that *knowledge is perception* (= KP).[1] Socrates congratulates him and suggests that Protagoras said the very same thing but in a different way, as he literally *wrote* that «man is the measure of all things (of those which are, that they are, of those which are not, that they are not)»,[2] by which he *meant* roughly that «*any given thing is for me the way it appears to me, and for you the way it appears to you*» (151e8–152a8) (*Measure Doctrine* = MD);[3] for example, the same gust of wind will appear (and so be) cold to me and appear (and so be) hot to you (b2–7). Such an assimilation between KP and MD is not an identity, but a strong theoretical connection: it is grounded first on the equivalence between a subject S *perceiving* something a certain way and something *appearing to* S a certain way (S's αἴσθησις of F = F's φαίνεσθαι to S);[4] through this equivalence, MD becomes "X is to S the way S *perceives* it", so perception is always «*of what is*» and is *never false/mistaken*,[5] just as knowledge is supposed to be, and indeed as KP makes explicit.

Then the *Secret Doctrine* (= SD) comes into the picture: whilst MD was what the letter of Protagoras's *homo-mensura* sentence in his *Truth* purportedly

1 151e1–3: though cautiously proposed (*δοκεῖ οὖν μοι … ὥς γε νυνὶ φαίνεται*), KP is meant to be a proper definition (*οὐκ ἄλλο τί ἐστιν ἐπιστήμη ἢ αἴσθησις*) – the smart Theaetetus has been methodologically "trained" by Socrates beforehand about the inadequateness of providing examples or incomplete characterizations – so *definiens* and *definiendum* are supposed to be co-extensive: if KP is true, any case of knowledge is a case of perception and the other way round.

2 152a2–4.

3 I take λέγει at 152a6 as meaning «means» rather than «says», as it is an explicitly Socratic interpretation of what Protagoras wrote.

4 Just below (152c1–3) the equivalence between αἴσθησις and φαντασία is explicitly stated, but it is also limited to cases of *stricto sensu sensory* perception (i.e. *of* properties like [cold], [warm] and the like).

5 One comes to be perceiving, you come to be perceiving *something* (160a9–10), perception cannot be objectless.

meant in spirit, SD was "secret", so – net of irony or dramatic purpose – it is a doctrine that Socrates suggests Protagoras *could have shared* or assumed but which he did not share *apertis verbis* or even "mean", as in a climax from a literal to a more interpretation-laden rendering. According to SD, nothing is just *one thing in itself*, nothing is *qualified* in some way, nothing ever *is* but everything *becomes* (152d1–7). Later on, Socrates will say more about how such a flux ontology supports MD and, mediately, KP so as to make up a sort of threefold, internally consistent philosophical picture: when a stone appears white to S, the [white] quality did not already belong to the stone but it comes into being as soon as the stone and S's eyes causally get in touch, so there are no white stones unless for a given subject at a given time in a given perceptual encounter (153d8–154a5), where sensation and sensible quality are "twins" having as "parents" the perceptual organ/capacity as a passive principle and the object (which is not qualified in itself but qualifies only as a perceptual *relatum*) as an active principle.[6] Without entering into the highly controversial issues concerning SD and its possible readings,[7] let us simply observe that SD is a relational ontology aimed at describing *an objective* (*though poorly determined*) *world* made out of active and passive *observer-independent* causal powers: as supporting MD, SD sheds light on MD *not* being a sort of solipsistic phenomenalism entailing the negation of an external world – whatever else it may be (more on this, later). To sum up:

KP – Knowledge is Perception
MD – For every (S)(F)(X): X *appears* F to S ←→ X *is* F 'for' S
SD – Nothing *is*, nothing is *one* or has *properties* in itself, but everything becomes, none of the appearing properties exist before perceptual encounters, no *relata* exist before the respective relation (and there are no *stable* relations).[8]

Let us focus on MD now. From the point when it is introduced, MD goes through many significant steps of "broadening" of different kinds,[9] most of which take

6 SD is restated at 156a2–157c2, at 159b160d, and will be refuted at 181b–183. Notice that the active principle is said to be a stone but in fact it is an indeterminate X in itself, because [being a stone] also is a property which can come into being only *for* a subject who encounters "it".

7 Cf. LEE (2000), BUCKELS (2016), ZILIOLI in *this collection*.

8 The three doctrines are said to coincide (160d6); the implication order seems to be contrary to the order of introduction: SD → MD → KP (168b5–7).

9 Here I am extending Fine's distinction between *Narrow*- and *Broad* Protagoreanism (FINE 1996).

place *en passant* or at least without special emphasis but radically – though gradually – transform the original meaning of the theory. This phenomenon, of course, is not a Platonic negligence of fallacy but a deliberate move rich in philosophical significance: it is a way in which the game of anticipating and "prefiguring" elements which will be appreciated only retrospectively is wisely mastered by Plato. Such "broadenings" concern all the basic terms at stake in the formulation of MD:

X appears F to S ← → X is F for S

- ***Appearing***: this is first equated with *sensorily perceiving* (αἰσθάνεσθαι), then it is more often referred to as *seeming* (δοκεῖν[10]), then it becomes *believing* (δοξάζειν[11]). A climax of "cognitive thickness": αἰσθάνεσθαι → φαίνεσθαι → δοκεῖν → δοξάζειν.
- ***F*** **(*the appearing property*)**: the theory is first supposed to concern *stricto sensu* perceptual properties (cold/hot, white, bitter/sweet), then it comes to include *lato sensu* perceptual properties (desires, pleasures and the like),[12] and finally also covers *moral* properties (just/unjust, good, "beautiful", "pious'"[13]) as well as other descriptive but non-perceptual properties (useful).[14]
- ***S*** **(*the subject*)**: MD originally concerns *individual subjects* (Socrates, or Socrates-ill, or Socrates-at-*t*), but later the (true) appearing can also be indexed to *collective subjects* like a whole city.[15] The broadening of the subject entails the broadening of the properties, since perceptual properties do not appear one way or another to different cities, but only moral properties – and perhaps other descriptive non-perceptual properties – do.
- ***X*** **(*the object*)**: MD is introduced as concerning perceivable objects like a gust of wind, a stone, a sip of wine (with respective perceptual properties), then it comes to concern more abstract objects such as behaviours, laws and political deliberations (just, useful, good, beautiful) and – this is especially relevant for the Self-Refutation Argument (= SRA) – *opinions* and *judgements* (true/false, useful-good/dangerous-bad).
- "***is***": when MD concerns perceptual properties, "is" boils down to "*physically becomes*" (= SD); when MD concerns "thicker" and more abstract features

10 Starting from 158b5–6; 161c2–3; 162c8–d2,
11 Δοξάζειν is anticipated at 150b2 in the case of dreams.
12 156b2–7.
13 Cf. 167c5, 157d7–9.
14 Cf. 172a5 ff.
15 Cf. 172a1ff. On the relevance of the City as a subject, see KEELING (2015).

such as moral properties or properties like *true* or *false*, "is" must mean something else (perhaps "metaphysically becomes", or something along these lines). It is worth keeping in mind that if all appearances are true to the subject (as being *of what is*), then also the appearance (to a subject) of a belief as *true* is true (to that subject).

It is worth remarking that while all these progressive kinds of broadening are reciprocally related they do not necessarily come together: for example, a perceptual *property* does not have to *appear* only perceptually, it can (also) appear doxastically, when we *come to believe by perceptual means* that X is F (= red, sweet, white), or when we predict that something will be sweet in the future.[16] But, of course, when collective subjects are concerned, perceptual properties are not what is at stake, and when non-perceptual properties are concerned, sensory appearing is not what is at stake.

It should also be noted that the others' appearances Protagoras claims to be able to change (not from false to true but from bad to good)[17] are not the *stricto sensu* perceptual ones, but the *lato sensu* perceptual ones (pleasures, desires) and the moral-axiological ones (just, good, pious and the like). So Protagoras himself *must* hold MD as a "broad MD" if his practice is to make any sense at all, and this is what Plato (or Socrates and his Protagoras *redivivus*) allows to emerge progressively through the apparently artless though all-but-innocent broadenings referred to above.

The Secret Doctrine (SD) is introduced to support a *narrow* version of MD, namely, the true sensory appearing of perceptual properties (belonging to sensible objects) to an individual subject (or, subject-at-*t*). Sensible and particular contents are "there" to shape our sensations, are essentially instantaneous and private, and come-to-be just as the sensible objects somehow impact our senses: they are not shareable, and this is why there cannot be any genuine conflict of appearances, either inter-subjective (synchronic or diachronic) or intra-subjective (diachronic), nor any falsity.[18]

The evaluation of MD is controversial in the literature, and the ways it has been labelled are often ambiguous; a relevant debate is about whether MD is a

16 At 160d1–3, I know what I perceive as perception is free from falsehood and given that I do not «trip up in my thought» (διάνοια); at 161d2–3 MD becomes: what each one *believes by means of perception* (δι' αἰσθήσεως δοξάζῃ), is true for him/her. On judging on future perceptions, cf. 178c9 ff.

17 166d4 ff.

18 The presence of the object is sufficient for the truth of the perception. Only later will it become clear that perceptions as such are not mental states which can "touch" being and truth so they cannot be instances of knowledge (186c–e12).

kind of relativism or an infallibilism.[19] On the infallibilist reading, the gust of wind I am confronted with *really* is cold full stop, so my appearance is "traditionally" true; your gust of wind really is warm, indeed is *another* gust of wind altogether.[20] With intra-subjective diachronic variations, there cannot be any conflict either, since the X that is F to me-at-*t* is a numerically different X than the X that is not-F to me-at-t^1 (but also me-at-*t* is another subject than me-at-t^1, as Protagoras clarifies in the so-called Apology);[21] on a relativist reading – as the first presentation of MD seems to be[22] – there are *public*, shared objects with private, relative, subject-indexed properties: the very same gust of wind is "cold-for-me" but "hot-for-you", or, of the very same gust of wind, it is true-for-me that it is hot, and it is true-for-you that it is cold.

INF: X appears F to me ←→ X *is* F (the "for-me" qualification only individuates "my" object).

REL: X appears F to me ←→ X is *F-for-me* (or/and it is *true-for-me* that X is F)[23]

The second presentation of MD – as Protagoras replies to Socrates's first objections in the "Apology" – is more radical and fits with the infallibilist reading: it is not that the public objects are one way (F) relative-to-me and another way (not-F) relative-to-you, it is that each private object is just one way (be it F or not-F), "my" object just *is* one way, "your" object *is* another. No perceptual

19 For the infallibilist reading, cf. FINE (1996), (1998); for the relativist reading cf. BURNYEAT (1976), (1990); MCDOWELL (1973), KETCHUM (1992), among many others: there are many different versions of the relativist reading, which I shall not go into here.

20 FINE (1998), p. 190: «Infallibilism does not have an unusual understanding of the true predicate, nor does it deny that any propositions are flat out true. Rather, it has an unusual understanding of the conditions under which objects have properties»; she speaks of MD as a «private absolutism» (1998, pp. 205–6).

21 166b6–9. See 159b1 ff. Here I do not discuss whether and to what extent Plato could share SD as a "regional" ontology concerning the sensible realm: but in some passages he does seem to take qualitative change as entailing the "birth" of numerically different objects, as shown by ADEMOLLO (2018).

22 152b6ff.

23 For REL (e.g. MCDOWELL 1973, BURNYEAT 1976, EMILSSON 1994) "true" means true-for-a-person, and there is no truth *simpliciter*. For INF (es. FINE 1998) all beliefs are absolutely true *and* P is true only if believed, so the move from "P is true for S" and "P is true" is always legitimate (p. 188). WATERLOW (1977) takes MD to be a «relativism of facts» rather than a relativism of truth: but given that a) the predicate "true" seems to be treated just like any other property (cold, sweet, white) – as emphasized by KETCHUM (1992), b) a relevant meaning of the Greek "to be" is the alethic or veritative one (KAHN 1973), so "is" can mean "is true" or "is the case", and c) if facts are relative then also truths about them *ipso facto* become relative, then a transition from "A is F for S" to "'A is F' is true for S" is natural and allowed, so the two readings are not alternative.

object can ever be shared (not even with oneself at different times); what can be "shared" is a (highly undetermined) active causal principle which brings about different experiences *and different objects* in me and in you at a certain time: nothing is really "out there" apart from undetermined active principles and other passive principles or subjects (confronted with numerically different objects, each generated into a particular perceptual episode). It is true that SD as a flux ontology makes more sense as supporting infallibilism (any object always changes, as does any subject: so, there are no shareable objects over time, and no conflict)[24], but as soon as MD broadens so as to involve *non-perceptual* properties and mental attitudes, it seems that the new kind of objects cannot be *essentially* private but *must* be shareable, so a sort of looping oscillation between an infallibilist MD ("my" object is really F, as yours is really not-F, so we're both right) and a relativist one (X is F to me and not F to you, and we're both right *about* X) is inescapably constitutive of *Broad* MD. Plato wants such a tension to emerge gradually: he wants us to realize that *at a perceptual level* we can conceive a "privatized" epistemology like MD (we can also consistently support it with an ontological framework like SD),[25] but beyond that level – i.e. with Broad MD – at least a subset of the objects we *think* of and *talk* about with *others* who *disagree* with us about *them* through having beliefs *incompatible* with ours, on the one hand must be shared and cannot just be private (as for INF), yet on the other hand neither can their properties be private nor can the truth-value of our respective "seemings" be merely subject-indexed (as for REL).[26] With Broad MD, disagreement cannot (always) be apparent *because* the objects of such disagreements cannot (always) be "private".

This, I submit, is part of what is shown by the Self-Refutation Argument (= SRA), to which we turn our attention now.

24 See FINE (1996).

25 Of course, Plato cannot accept KP because perception's being of "what is" (for the subject) is not sufficient for it to be knowledge. However, he could accept that perception gets us in touch with real though private and ephemeral sense-objects, particulars and properties whose ontology is captured by SD (even if he holds that the objects of knowledge are others).

26 I say "at least a subset of objects", because being a non-perceptual object or property is not sufficient as such for not being relative to a subject: there can well be moral or aesthetic properties that are "subjective", Socrates himself does not rule it out (at least in this dialogue) but argues that *certain* non-perceptual properties, like [useful] cannot be consistently treated as subjective (as the respective beliefs concerning them cannot be only subjectively true).

2 Getting to the Self-Refutation Argument (SRA)

Socrates' refutation of MD starts by pointing out that if what appears to each person is true, then we are no more ignorant than Protagoras, so why should we pay him any due as a teacher wiser than ourselves? In addition, dialogue and confutation would make no sense at all.[27] Both arguments are pragmatic and general in spirit, but they will find in the Self-Refutation Argument a sophisticated, more "self-referential" counterpart. Beforehand, a *redivivus* Protagoras in his Apology[28] replies that all appearances are true, but some are *better* than others, i.e. more useful and beneficial for the subject as well as for the city, and a good sophist or rhetorician is wise and money-deserving insofar as he can change others' appearances. He says, significantly, that Socrates «has to put up with being a measure, *whether he wants or not*» (168d3–4).

I will call *Self-Refutation Argument* (= **SRA**) a big, internally articulated argument which starts as soon as Socrates suggests directly criticizing Protagoras's own *logos*, i.e. MD, rather than his imagined counter-objections (169e7–169a1), and ends with the grotesque image of Protagoras popping up from the ground and then immediately going back underground (169e8–171d7). MD is restated in a *broad* version*: that what seems to anyone* (*τὸ δοκοῦν ἑκάστῳ*) *actually is* (*so*) *for the person to whom it seems* (*so*).[29] The *first argument* of SRA in brief (170a6–d3):

> Given than everyone believes[30] that **a)** some are wise and some are ignorant (on a given matter) and **b)** that wisdom is *true thinking* and ignorance is *false belief*:[31]
>
> **1)** *Empirical Premise*: everyone believes that **c)** sometimes people have true beliefs, sometimes people have false beliefs (= notMD).[32]
>
> Then, what can we do about Protagoras's *logos* (=MD)?

---

27 161c1–162a2.

28 166d–167d.

29 107a3–4; from now on, all my translations of the *Theaetetus* passages will follow MCDOWELL (1973) (often modified).

30 Δοξάζω, ἡγέομαι, οἴομαι are verbs I will translate with "believe": the semantic nuances do not matter for the present argument. For the ways of translating of δόξα in the dialogue, cf. NARCY 2002. As Castagnoli 2004 remarks, here a relaxed notion of belief is at stake, which can be manifested in behaviour.

31 Here Socrates may mean that ignorance brings about false beliefs about objects belonging to the domain one ignores.

32 (c) follows from (a) and (b) in such a straightforward way, that if one believes [(a) + (b)], she believes (c) thereby.

2) either **I)** people always have true beliefs (MD?), or **II)** sometimes people have true beliefs, sometimes people have false beliefs (= notMD).

3) assuming **(1)**, both from (I) and (II) it follows that *sometimes people have true beliefs, sometimes people have false beliefs* (= notMD).

Notice that [*sometimes people have true beliefs, sometimes people have false beliefs*] coincides both with (c) and with (II), where (c) is *the content* of everyone's belief. **Given (1), if (I) then (c); (c) = (II): then (II).** If we assume **(I)** – together with the *Empirical Premise* – we can infer its negation (which is **II**)! So far, the so-called qualifiers are formally absent,[33] the alternative being always-true/sometimes-false. [true] and [false] in (c) are true/false *simpliciter*, since (c) is the content of what people believe; but if (c) = (II), and (I) and (II) represent an exhaustive alternative, even in (I) and (II) [true] and [false] are to be read *simpliciter*; but is (I) identical to MD? If not, MD is not what is refuted here, even though Socrates purports to be refuting MD: if the same belief could be true *for* S and false *for* S^1 – as MD allows for and predicts *if* it is REL – in a sense all beliefs will be always true (*for* those who respectively believe them), in a sense there will be beliefs that are sometimes true (= for some) and sometimes false (= for others), so (I) and (II) would not be incompatible under a qualified reading (REL); hence the argument *prima facie* seems to work only against the idea that all beliefs are true *simpliciter* (INF).[34] In any case, the

---

33 For SEDLEY (2004), pp. 57–61, at 170c2 we should not understand «How then are we to deal with the *logos*, Protagoras?» (vocative, ὦ Πρωταγόρα) but «How then are we to deal with the logos *for Protagoras*?» (dative τῷ Πρωταγόρᾳ = qualifier, MSS B and D) and the (1)–(3) Argument describes what happens «in the world of Protagoras»: qualifiers would be absent because for MD the "Single Relativization Assumption" would hold, according to which you cannot say that "*for S*, things are such and such *for S^1*", so the first qualifier at 170c2 would govern all the argument below. I disagree about there being any "single relativization assumption"; on the contrary, it is part of the following arguments regarding Self-Refutation that Protagoras must admit that it is true *for him*, that S's appearances are true *for S*, and this *is* a double relativization (see the argument labelled as "(A)/(B)" below). The vocative at 170c elegantly recalls that of 170a6 when the argument begins, and it is argumentatively more plausible than the dative-qualifier as it calls Protagoras into a dialectical engagement, by ideally drawing on the previous "apology" and then to his "own logos" as affirmed by him. Cf. TRABATTONI (2016), pp. 109–110 for the problems of Sedley's translation; cf. CASTAGNOLI (2010), pp. 33–34 and CHAPPELL (2006), pp. 113–120 for more philosophical criticism.

34 FINE (1998), p. 195, argues that Protagoras is an infallibilist, so (1)–(3) is sound against infallibilism and the absence of qualifiers is what is expected. I think Plato wants us to take it *first* as an argument against INF, but then he asks us to reconsider it in the light of what follows, as an argument against REL (see below). That it is *also* an argument against

Empirical Premise is fundamental, because if no one believed (c), (II) could be rejected – no problems in (II) being rejected insofar as it is not anyone's *belief* – and (I) could well be true. The only way to consistently hold MD – assuming that (**I**) is MD – is by denying not only (1) but also the much weaker proposition that *someone* believes that some beliefs are false: *MD entails that everyone believes MD*; indeed, Socrates says that it is a *necessary consequence* of MD (170d1–2) and, facing a puzzled Theodorus, explains this entailment by explicitly appealing to qualifiers, as follows:

> When you judge something by yourself, and express a belief about it to me, it will be true *for you*, according to his *logos* (= MD), but what about the rest of us?

Three options follow:

i) We cannot become judges of your judgement
ii) We always believe your judgement is true
iii) Many people have beliefs opposed to your judgement and take it to be false (*Theaet.* 170d4–9).

Apparently, MD should entail either (i) or (ii) – this is undetermined so far – but (iii) is what happens *de facto*. Option (iii) is analogous to (**I**) above – as a matter of fact, people do have beliefs about others' beliefs and often take them to be false, and we need to account for this empirical fact within MD. Now, below in (**iv**) the qualifiers are appealed to in order to account for (iii), though in (iii), as in (c) above, "false" means false *simpliciter* as it is embedded in the Opponents' belief. Now: if (i)–(iii) is an account of (1)–(3) above and (iv) accounts for (iii) through appealing to qualifiers, it *must* mean that at (1)–(3) the qualifiers were implicitly at stake, at least on a possible reading of (1)–(3). We will come back to (1)–(3) later, but it is evident that Theodorus is asked by Socrates to reconsider retrospectively the sequence (1)–(3) in light of the explanation he immediately gives *about* it: an explanation of *why* MD entails that everyone believes MD (170d1–2), i.e. of why the empirical fact described by (iii) and accounted for by (iv) according to MD, is incompatible with MD itself. Indeed, Socrates first "qualifies" (iii) so to make it compatible with MD:

INF, fits well with Aristotle (*Met.* IV 5, XI 6) and Sextus (*Sext. Emp.* M 7, 60–64) taking it to be such: theirs would be a *partial* reading of the multi-layered Platonic argument, rather than a mere misunderstanding of it.

iv) […] do you want us to say that on that occasion (= iii) you have a true belief *for* you but false *for* those countless people? (*Theaet.* 170e3–4).[35]

The example is about Theodorus's belief in a proposition P (not about MD itself, which was the believed/not-believed content in the argument (1)–(3) above); Theodorus acknowledges (iv) is necessary for MD (e6), as it is the only possible description of the empirical fact (iii) under MD. In fact, both (i) and (ii) on the one hand were entailed as consequences of *Narrow* MD as supported by SD,[36] yet on the other hand they are *prima facie* not compatible with *Broad* MD *plus* the empirical fact (iii), because people do make judgements about others' beliefs so for (i) they should be flat out *wrong* in so doing, and because people sometimes do judge others' belief to be false *simpliciter* so for (ii) they should be flat out wrong in so doing. But on MD no-one's belief is flat out wrong. As soon as MD is expressly couched with the qualifiers, P becomes MD and the subject becomes Protagoras himself, so that (i)–(iv) *come to concern MD itself* as in a self-referential move where MD as a belief follows under MD:

> And what *for* Protagoras himself?[37] Is it not necessary that *if* (**A**) neither he believed that Man is the Measure (= MD) nor did the Many (as they do not), that truth he has written would not be *for* anyone? If instead (**B**) he believed it but the Many did not share this belief with him, then, (**b1**) in the first place (πρῶτον) it is more the case that it isn't the truth than it is: more in the proportion by which those to whom it doesn't seem to outnumber those to whom it does.
>
> *Theaet.* 170e7–171a3

35 Remember that "true for S" does not just mean "true in S's view" but something much stronger than that. If Socrates takes (iv) to be necessary according to the *logos* (171e6), then he is not arguing *against* an infallibilist but about a relativist. *Contra*, FINE (1998), who takes these datives to be «datives of the person judging» (*dativus iudicantis*) indeed: if it was so, then all the many occurrences in which MD comes with the dative would trivially mean that if X seems F to me, then I believe X is F: this is hardly plausible, as it would entail that Socrates and Plato treat a platitude as an eccentric philosophical view.

36 Under Narrow MD I am the only judge of my own appearances since me-at-t is the only one who "suffers" these objects (i), but this holds for any subject with respect to his/her private objects (ii), which MD says to be all true (for "their" S).

37 We need to distinguish "according to Protagoras's *logos*" and "*for* Protagoras": what precedes (= iv) describes what happens to someone's belief in P according to Protagoras's *logos*, what follows describes what happens according to Protagoras's *logos for* Protagoras himself as believing his own *logos*.

This *first* consequence concerning the second option **(B)** (**b1** = *more* people disbelieving MD → MD being *less* the case that is true than it is not) has often been considered unconvincing if not fallacious[38] but is very important, for it makes explicit that for Socrates the qualifiers *should* be self-referentially applicable to MD itself (especially if man is to be the measure of *all* things).[39] MD needs to be true in the very sense in which each other appearance/seeming/belief is true; it does not escape its own rule as an exception, and this is why if it is believed to be true by one but false by many, it is no more true than false (rather: it is even more false than is true). This construal of MD has been labelled *Global Relativism* (= **GR**), against the *Qualified Relativism* (= **QR**)[40] for which MD is *objectively true*, not being "self-applicable" so to speak. Of course, QR is a version of REL, not of INF: if MD was INF, MD would be true *simpliciter* just as every other belief is, so INF is naturally "global". Whether or not MD was originally meant to be QR, Socrates brings "his" Protagoras to commit to GR here.[41] It is made clear that Protagoras's theory, *from the very point of view of Protagoras*, cannot have any precedence over its alternative: if he's right and *qua* right – given what average people believe – he will be no more right than he's wrong! Thus, this argument assumes that if MD was right, it would have to be *qualifiedly* rather than objectively right, which clearly means that Socrates is *not* arguing against INF.

Now, a *second* consequence of (**B**) (ἔπειτα), an «especially clever feature» of MD[42] (= **b2**) is pointed out which shows it to *have to be* somehow disbelieved by Protagoras himself or by anyone else who "tries" to believe it, to the effect that we are left with the alternative (**A**): no one really believes MD, so it is «for no one».[43] Being for no one, there is no sense (not even a qualified sense) in which it is true.

---

38 See ERGINEL (2009), p. 30n; NARCY (1994), p. 340n. The argument and its readings are discussed in depth in KEELING (2015).

39 Perhaps it is not by chance that at 170d1–2 MD is reported through the *literal homomensura* sentence: it is the *logos* that «man is the measure of *all* things», that is said to necessarily entail that no one believes that there are false beliefs.

40 Cf. ERGINEL (2009). For WATERLOW (1977), WEDIN (2005) and TRABATTONI (2016), (2020) Protagoras holds QR. I agree with Erginel that the oscillation between QR and GR is something Plato wants to let emerge as inevitable and troubling for Protagoras.

41 I agree with LEE (2005), who suggests that Plato forces Protagoras to commit to GR: this is realized by (A)/(B).

42 As CASTAGNOLI 2004 and 2010 convincingly argues, it is the *logos* (MD) that has an «especially clever feature» (where «cleaver» is ironic), rather than the Self-Refutation Argument itself.

43 The very existence of unbelieved truths would be contrary to MD. In fact, b1 prepares b2 and, mediately, (A): b1 already shows that Protagoras's view cannot claim any privilege

Let us keep the structure of the argument in mind: (**1**)–(**3**) is explained by (**i**)–(**iv**); (**iv**) makes the issue of the qualifiers explicit and applies them to MD itself, so shaping the (**A**)/(**B**) alternative; (**B**) is also put in trouble by an argument (the "quantitative" one, **b1**), but through showing the «especially clever feature» of MD (= **b2**) the alternative (**A**) is confirmed over (**B**). It is a large, self-contained argument, whose last piece (**b2**) formally is a *second* consequence of the hypothesis (**B**) (the case in which Protagoras believes MD), but its conclusion is the exclusion of the hypothesis itself, to come back to its alternative (**A**) (not even Protagoras could genuinely believe MD). This is quite an ironical, even paradoxical outcome: MD predicts that if P is not believed by anyone it cannot be true in any sense, but no one, not even Protagoras, could really believe MD, so MD predicts that MD cannot be true in any sense! Why does believing MD entail disbelieving it? What is the nature of such entailment: logical, rhetorical, pragmatical, "phenomenological"? Let us look at this "especially clever" consequence of MD.

3 The "Especially Clever Feature" Argument (in Two Steps)

3.1 First Step *of the "Especially Clever Feature" Argument* (*171a6–b3*)

(Protagoras) at some point (που) concedes (συγχωρεῖ) that the belief of his opponents (τῶν ἀντιδοξαζόντων) about his own belief (= MD) – i.e. of those who hold that he is wrong (= MD is false) – is true, since he agrees (ὁμολογῶν) that everyone believes *what is* (τὰ ὄντα). (*Theaet.* 171a6–9).

First, here there *are* opponents, as in option (iii) above that we are still exploring as accountable by (iv) – indeed, the (A)/(B) alternative depends on (iv): there is genuine disagreement (ἀντιδοξάζειν), or two "appearances" which can be conflicting at all only insofar as they are about a *shared* object of discourse, i.e. about MD as a belief. Qualifiers are formally absent again: the Opponents believe Protagoras is wrong *simpliciter*, but as he concedes[44] that this belief of theirs is *true*, why is he supposed to agree they are right *simpliciter* (about him being wrong *simpliciter*)? Just like in the sequence (1)–(3) above, *prima facie* Plato looks inadvertent if not unfair, because Protagoras only has

regarding his Opponents' view, so it highlights a troubling symmetry between him and his Opponents, then b2 shows an even more troubling asymmetry against him.

44 The difference between the verbs συγχωρέω ("concede") and ὁμολογέω ("agree") is of the greatest importance for grasping the argument: the first entails that one endorses the other's view in the other's terms; the second – at least in Plato, as carefully argued by BROWN (2018) – only means one's commitment to a proposition, which could be not shared by anyone else.

to agree that his belief in MD is false *for his Opponents*, qualifiedly, whilst it is true for him, Protagoras: the argument would be valid only if Protagoras held that all appearances are true *simpliciter* (= INF) – as in (I) above – instead of qualifiedly, but (i)–(iv) have just made it clear that this is not the case. As in (1)–(3), MD again seems to be misrepresented as saying that all beliefs are unqualifiedly true, although notice that the reason why Protagoras must agree that the Opponents are right is that he concedes that everyone believes τὰ ὄντα (a9), something *real*. When MD was first introduced, being a "narrow" MD it concerned perceptual properties and perceiving subjects (KP was in the background): the idea was that the intentional object of perception must be existent, real, among τὰ ὄντα indeed; SD was called on in support of narrow MD and it accounted for how it is that each perceiver is confronted with *real* though private objects and properties coming into existence together with the perception itself. Now we have *believers* instead of perceivers and a *true/false belief* (so a non-perceptual object with non-perceptual properties: a *content* with truth-values[45]) instead of a cold/hot wind blowing: could Protagoras still hold that there is *no* genuine disagreement in such cases? Shouldn't he say, absurdly – especially in this peculiar, self-referential case where the object is MD itself – that no one can really believe that MD is false, or that no one can judge "his" MD – case (i) above – just as no one can judge "my" cold wind blowing but can only judge "his/her" own hot wind blowing, the only one with which he/she is really confronted? The game of qualifiers does not work anymore, as soon as MD broadens, not only because MD is no longer supported by SD, but because it does not make sense to take an abstract content (a proposition, like MD) to be subject-dependent *in that way* ("my MD is true, your MD is false: it becomes true as soon as it gets in touch with me, it becomes false as soon as it gets in touch with you"[46]). Non-perceptual objects like beliefs are essentially shareable and publicly judgeable as regards their truth or falsity: this feature

45 WATERLOW (1977), p. 33, n. 18 suggests that in Plato's view there are no abstract contents or propositions that can be true or false, but only actual beliefs of someone which can be true or false (see also HINTIKKA 1967 for a similar view). I doubt it, but even if the truth-bearers are belief-tokens, what matters is that two belief-tokens can be *about* the same "abstract" object, i.e. a belief-token, and be incompatible insofar as they attribute to it two incompatible "abstract" properties ([true], [false]). About truth being such that we cannot *perceptually* get in touch with it, cf. *Theaet.* 186e4–5.

46 The idea of a subject-indexed universal content like MD remains absurd even if we accept the Protagoras' commitment to a "Broad Heracliteanism" or metaphysical becoming (cf. ERGINEL 2009, TRABATTONI 2018, pp. LIV–LXV): even in this case, there would be no truth-value at all because there would be no shared content at all, so "MD" would not capture a determinate (and shareable) content but it would be an empty label ambiguously denoting different particulars.

of theirs brings with it a sense of truth/falsity which *cannot* just be subject-indexed *à la* Protagoras. The argument is sketched out again, *without* qualifiers:

> Then, he should concede (συγχωροῖ) that his belief (= MD) is false, if he agrees (ὁμολογεῖ) that those who hold that he has a wrong belief have a true belief.
>
> *Theaet*. 171b1–2

Again, qualifiers are absent,[47] and the previous reference to τὰ ὄντα characterizes MD as giving genuine "reality" to the content of any appearances, as for INF. But the ambiguity between *true* and *true-for* is not Plato's fault nor inadvertence on his part – rather, it internally affects Protagoras' view, making it oscillate: MD itself entails that a subject has no epistemic privilege over other subjects, *apart* from the privilege depending on having access to one's "own" private objects (on which he/she is the only reliable judge); but once MD is posited as the same shared object the Many take to be false and Protagoras takes to be true (for him?), true and true-for tend to collapse into each other and a genuine conflict emerges. As we shall soon see, the genuine conflict with the Opponents can be avoided only by fatally transferring it *into* Protagoras himself. The Opponents' belief that MD is wrong *simpliciter* is true, *just as* is his belief that MD is true: even if true was true-for here, he and the Many would be on a par about MD being false *simpliciter* or not (this is a qualitative declination of the Quantitative Argument above = b1). But he could insist that the Opponents' belief (about his belief, MD) is true *for them*, but not *simpliciter* (and not even *for him*), such that MD is true *for* Protagoras but false *for* the Opponents. This is only free speculation at this point, but an attentive reader might already glimpse that Protagoras's view is in trouble as predicting that it is only qualifiedly true – and no less than it is qualifiedly false – that all appearances are qualifiedly true! Not to speak of making sense of the Opponents' belief that MD is false *simpliciter* being true *for them*: doesn't "I am wrong *simpliciter* only for you" amount to "It is *for you*, and not *simpliciter*, that I am wrong"? This would reopen a genuine conflict, as is progressively made explicit by the two following passages.

---

47 KETCHUM (1992) holds that Plato both refutes relativism (public objects with relative properties) and what he calls «solipsism» (private objects with non-relative properties) and seems to me to coincide with Fine's infallibilism: (i)–(iv) and (A)/(B) would be against relativism, while the Especially Clever Feature Argument would be against solipsism (= INF); but it would be very strange that the second consequence of the same hypothesis (B) was directed at another view than the one which underlies the whole (A)/(B) hypothesis.

3.2 Second Step *of the "Especially Clever Feature" Argument* (171b4–c3)

> Οἱ δέ γ' ἄλλοι οὐ συγχωροῦσιν (ἑαυτοὺς/ἑαυτοῖς?) ψεύδεσθαι (*Theaet*. 171b4–5) […]
>
> Ὁ δέ γ' αὖ ὁμολογεῖ καὶ ταύτην ἀληθῆ τὴν δόξαν ἐξ ὧν γέγραφεν (*Theaet*. 171b7–8).

At b5 the only the manuscript (W) has ἑαυτοὺς, the others (B, D and T) have ἑαυτοῖς.[48]

If we read a) ἑαυτοὺς (= ***lectio*** **a**) the passage means:

> *But the others do not concede that what they believe is false* […] And he, again, admits that that belief of theirs is true, according to what he has written.
>
> (*Theaet*. 171b4–8)

So, not only has Protagoras to agree that "Protagoras' belief (MD) is false" is true, but he must also admit that the Opponents are right *in believing that their own belief that Protagoras is wrong simpliciter, is true simpliciter*, since they do not concede that their belief is false, *not even for him*, and he must again accept that they are right in not conceding this. *That further belief* (*καὶ* ταύτην ἀληθῆ τὴν δόξαν) is the Opponents' belief about their own belief (regarding Protagoras's belief) not being false (not even *for* Protagoras) but being true *simpliciter*: here, the qualifier must be supplied in order for the argument to make sense, because what they do not *concede* to Protagoras cannot be that they are wrong *simpliciter*, since on MD (*if* MD is GR) there is no such a thing as "to be false *simpliciter*". Insofar as we can have beliefs about our own beliefs (second-order, *n*-order beliefs), our beliefs of *any* order should be taken as true *simpliciter* by Protagoras, since at each level we will believe that our belief about our "previous order" belief about (our *n*-belief about) him is true *simpliciter*, not just *for us* (and that about our respective belief he is false *simpliciter*, not just for us).[49] The Opponents do not agree that their belief is false, *not even "for" Protagoras*.

---

48 The *lectio* ἑαυτοῖς is printed by BURNET (who follows BT). The *lectio* ἑαυτοὺς, printed by HICKEN (who follows W), is chosen by MCDOWELL (1973), NARCY (1994), FINE (1998), p. 202, BURNYEAT (1976), p. 186 (and BURNYEAT-LEVETT 1990, p. 299) and in general by most scholars.

49 One may think that the *regressus* is not Protagoras's fault and that charging him with it is ultimately question-begging. But as he says: "that my belief (= MD) is false *simpliciter*, is true for you", he must mean that notMD is not true *simpliciter* as the Opponents hold, but it is such for them, *contrary* to what the Opponents hold. After all, if he and the

The implicit reply of Protagoras, with which they do not agree (συγχωροῦσιν, b4), would be that in his view they *are* right, but they are such *for* themselves, whilst they are false *for* him, as in (iv) above. They do not want their belief about (their own belief about) Protagoras to be relativized in this way, because relativization is exactly what they are opposing. Protagoras at some point must hold either that they are true *simpliciter* (as they take themselves to be) or that they are false *simpliciter* (in taking themselves to have a true-*simpliciter* belief about him being wrong *simpliciter*); in either case he is obliged to admit that there are beliefs that are false *simpliciter* (either his own or their belief) so he shows himself to disbelieve MD. Notice that this is what (1)–(3) has already concluded, but without making the qualifiers explicit: the conclusion of (1)–(3) is now shown to be a conclusion Protagoras himself needs to commit to, something which must hold *for him*: if there is even *one* subject who believes MD is false, MD cannot be consistently maintained by *anyone*, since it dialectically collapses under its own weight.

On the other reading (= ***lectio*** **b**) of the *Second Step*, ἑαυτοῖς (b5), chosen by Cooper and Bemelmans and cleverly argued by Castagnoli,[50] the passage means «but they do not concede *he* is wrong *for them*»:[51] the unstated subject would be an αὐτὸν referring to Protagoras.[52] The Opponents do not concede that Protagoras is wrong *just for them*: they do not accept relativizing the truth of their belief about Protagoras' belief. Their rejection of MD, and thus of the relativization of any truth to a given believer, is exactly what is at stake, since it is exactly what they are denying. They say: Protagoras, you are wrong full stop, you are not wrong just-for-us! And Protagoras will have to accept also this further belief, i.e. that he is wrong *simpliciter*, not just-for-them. Here, at some point there must be a genuine disagreement of the kind Protagoras cannot allow for – on a certain shared object, there will be two *incompatible* beliefs, so that one of them must be false *simpliciter*: either Protagoras's belief (= MD) is false (only) for the Opponents, *or* it is false *simpliciter*. So either Protagoras holds that his belief (= MD) is false only for the Opponents *and* so he must hold that the Opponents' belief that his belief is false *simpliciter* **is** *false simpliciter*, or he insists on holding that the Opponents' belief that his belief is false *simpliciter* is false *for him* but true *for them;* but in this case he must also hold that the Opponents are false *simpliciter*, insofar as they believe that their

Opponents never held contrary or incompatible views, he should just concede anything to them without qualifying clauses.

50 BEMELMANS (2002), p. 80; COOPER (1998), p. 74; see also POLANSKY (1992), p. 131.

51 CORNFORD (1957) favors ἑαυτοῖς and translates «But the others, on their side, do not admit to themselves they are wrong»: it seems to me that «to themselves» would be redundant, at an argumentative level.

52 The immediately preceding αὐτὸν at 171b2.

belief that his belief is false *simpliciter* is true *simpliciter*, not just-for-them. *If* there is disagreement *at some point* (171a6: που), Protagoras can disagree only by agreeing with his Opponents *in their terms*; if there is no disagreement, then the Opponents are originally right *simpliciter*, and Protagoras disagrees with his own MD by accepting he is false *simpliciter* in believing MD. On this reading, Protagoras agrees that «this further belief is true» (*καὶ* ταύτην ἀληθῆ τὴν δόξαν, 171b7–8), i.e. the Opponents' belief that he is wrong (in a not qualified sense), a belief they express when not conceding to him that he is wrong *for them* (171b4–5).[53]

Both readings at b5 (ἑαυτοὺς = ***lectio*** **a** and ἑαυτοῖς = ***lectio*** **b**) make sense and allow for interpreting this as a key passage within a sound and successful argument, whose conclusion is that Protagoras will come to disbelieve MD as soon as he believes *and* affirms it before an opponent. Whether the Opponents do not concede that *they* are false even *for him* (*lectio* a), or they do not concede that *he* is false just *for them* (*lectio* b), the argument would be the same, the second option carrying the advantage of having the qualifier explicitly present (ἑαυτοῖς), but the disadvantage of having an implicit subject of the infinitive (αὐτὸν = Protagoras), in both cases we need to add something and think of an implicit reply of Protagoras, to which our passage is a counter-reply:[54] but this is a price worth paying, in order not to make this passage redundant and argumentatively useless.

The moral here is that Protagoras cannot genuinely disagree with the Opponents about there being genuine disagreement between them: if he genuinely disagrees, in so doing he agrees about there being genuine disagreement,[55] if he does not disagree, he commits to their view that there are beliefs which are false *simpliciter*. Indeed, only if MD is false (*simpliciter*) can there be genuine

53 At 179b6–9 Theodorus sums up that Protagoras's doctrine has been refuted with two main arguments, one based on the useful (one can be flat out wrong in believing that something will be beneficial or dangerous in the future) and SRA, i.e. the one «which showed that Protagoras made other views than his own authoritative, although those other views hold that Protagoras' beliefs are not true *in any sense at all* (οὐδαμῇ)».

54 This point is duly stressed by EMILSSON (1994). Castagnoli holds that his ingenuous reading (= *lectio* b) is much better as there is «no need for supplying implicit steps in the argument» (CASTAGNOLI 2010, p. 35): it seems to me that on both readings there are the same steps to be supplied, namely, an implicit reply of Protagoras which is not conceded by the Opponents. According to (*lectio* a) he does concede that they are right when saying that he is wrong (b1–2), whilst they do *not* concede (he is right when saying that) they are wrong (b4–5): this is a perfect chiastic structure, elegant and rhetorically efficacious. We are naturally invited to read ψεύδεσθαι in Protagoras' terms (as qualified) by the very verb συγχωρεῖν; anyway, the Opponents do not accept they are false in *any* sense.

55 On Protagoras's denial that there is genuine disagreement, see BURNYEAT (1976), p. 181; GLIDDEN (1975).

disagreement, i.e. objectively *incompatible* beliefs about the same subject. In holding MD faced with an opponent, one (Protagoras or anyone else) must commit to there being a false *simpliciter* belief. This is why the conclusion of this part of SRA (the exploration of the «especially clever feature» of MD) is that:

> (MD) will be disputed by anyone, beginning with Protagoras himself, or rather *he will agree that he is wrong. As soon as he concedes to someone who says the contrary of him, that he has a true belief* (171b10–12), he will himself concede that a dog, or an ordinary man, isn't the measure of so much as one thing that he hasn't learnt. Isn't that so?
>
> *Theaet.* 171b10–c3

Given that (i)–(iv) have made qualifiers explicit and on both readings of 171b4–5 (*lectio* a or *lectio* b) the argument works, the conclusion is unsurprisingly without qualifiers: Protagoras must agree that the belief of the Opponents is true *simpliciter* (as *they* believe it to be), so he can no longer maintain MD.[56] Now, the conclusion of this whole part of the argument – the (**A**)/(**B**) alternative – shows that (**A**) is the correct one: not even Protagoras believed MD, so it is true for no one, which means that it is not true full stop (171c5–7).[57]

Now, we have seen that the (A)/(B) alternative, as well as the (i)–(iv) alternative which introduces it, first, directly appeals to the qualifiers and, second, represents MD as a GR (as self-applicable): the absence of qualifiers in the second consequence of (B) (= b2: the "Especially Clever Feature" Argument) is not Socrates's fallacy but a consequence of MD as believed/held by Protagoras before an opponent: *he* needs to drop the qualifiers at some point, and in so doing to disbelieve MD. But what about the absence of qualifiers in the (1)–(3) argument?

We have noticed that as soon as MD broadens so as to involve non-perceptual mental attitudes (such as beliefs and judgements) about non-perceptual

56 «He concedes to someone who says *the contrary of him* […]»: here «the contrary of him» is not only "MD is false" but also "MD is false non only for us, i.e. we are right not only for us in believing that MD is false" (this is the further belief he also must concede, *καὶ ταύτην* ἀληθῆ τὴν δόξαν, 171b7).

57 On the one hand, a normative idea of belief is at stake here: if you are not prepared to believe the necessary consequences of P, you do not really believe P; on the other, the "relaxed" notion of belief we found in the Empirical Premise of (1)–(3) (see footnote 30) is operative here as well: in the very *act* of opposing Socrates and the Many, he "performatively" – by his very dialectical behaviour – denies the content of his view: he denies *in actu exercito* what he claims *in actu signato*.

objects (such as beliefs) and properties (such as [true] or [false]), the infallibilist description of it becomes quite odd: for every belief to be true *simpliciter* without contradiction, we should never have genuinely conflicting beliefs, but how could two beliefs about the *same* belief ever be non-conflicting, if one characterizes the belief as F and the other characterizes it as not-F?[58] I think that (1)–(3) is a deliberately ambiguous argument, which somehow mimics Protagoras's ambiguity or oscillation regarding an infallibilist-to-relativist MD: in (1)–(3) the terms [true] and [false] are intentionally left undetermined,[59] in order for the argument to be read first as an argument against an infallibilist MD (= all beliefs are true *simpliciter*), and only later, at a more careful look – thanks to the clarifications provided by (i–iv) and (A)(B) – to be retrospectively reconsidered also under a qualified, "relativistic" reading. On the first reading, the belief (shared by virtually everyone) that "some beliefs are false *simpliciter*" must be true *simpliciter*, therefore MD, given the Empirical Premise, entails that there are false beliefs, i.e. its negation. On the second reading, the argument is much less straightforward but it works, once we come back to it and follow the "instructions" Socrates gives us in (i)–(iv) and (A)/(B): the Empirical Premise (1) stands as it is, because its occurrences of [true] and [false] are to be meant *simpliciter* as they are embedded into the content of everyone's belief; (2) represents a different alternative: in the horn (II) [true] and [false] are again to be meant *simpliciter*, since (II) is identical with (c), the content of everyone's belief, but in the horn (I), which represents MD, [true] this time is to be meant qualifiedly (true *for* those who have the respective belief). Horn (2) now says that *either* all beliefs are true for those who respectively have them, *or* some beliefs are true *simpliciter*, other beliefs are false *simpliciter*. This is an exhaustive alternative (either MD or notMD), and (3) tells us that both from (I) and (II) follows that some beliefs are true, some beliefs are false (*simpliciter*) (= (c), = (II) = notMD). The "Especially Clever Feature" Argument below shows us in detail *why* (II), (c), (notMD) follow from (I), i.e. from … MD itself: on this reading, this last argument shows in a not question-begging way that

58 Neither can we say anything about others' beliefs (= i), though Protagoras himself says a lot about others' belief; by saying that they are all true (= ii), he is the first to lean out of his "world" or out of his horizon of appearances.

59 The occurrences that are embedded into the Many's belief are "*simpliciter*" of course, the others being "neutral". *Contra* CASTAGNOLI 2004, 2010, for whom the qualifiers must be supplied in (1)–(3) otherwise Plato would have «a quite schizophrenic attitude towards MD» (2010, p. 31), I think the ambiguity – and the "schizophrenia" – is charged onto Protagoras by Plato, so a double reading is asked of the reader, who should treasure this very ambiguity (see *infra*).

believing MD *and* being aware that someone does not believe it, entails believing that there are false *simpliciter* beliefs, i.e. disbelieving MD.[60]

4 The Moral of the Self-Refutation Argument

Looking back, we can say that the whole Self-Refutation Argument shows a complex progression where Protagoras' view – which meanwhile has become *Broad* MD – comes to clarify its own possible declinations through the very elenctic treatment. First we have the (1)–(3) Argument, which on an intuitive reading is directed against the view that "All beliefs are true" (INF) and scores an easy victory: people's belief that there are false beliefs will be true, to the effect that not all beliefs will be true (= not-INF). Then the sequence (i)–(iv) comments on (1)–(3) so as to prepare a *qualified* reconsideration of it, as if

60 I think BURNYEAT (1976) is right in arguing that Socrates's arguments are sound even in the qualified reading: admitting that all beliefs are true *for* those who have them as entailing that MD is false *for* the Opponents (or that it is true *for them* that MD is false *simpliciter*) would commit Protagoras to admit that MD is false *simpliciter*, because *if* S believes notMD he «lives in a world in which his mere belief in P is neither sufficient nor necessary for P's truth» (p. 182), so MD «does not hold of S's judgements and beliefs» (p. 179). Burnyeat has been criticized for confusing "true *in* S's world" with "true *of* S's world" (cf. BOSTOCK 1988, FINE 1998, CASTAGNOLI 2004, pp. 15–18, WEDIN 2005, CHAPPELL 2006). Without entering into technicalities, I do not think it is a confusion; rather it is necessary within Protagoras' view, that one is the most authoritative subject about one's own appearances and beliefs. On MD, if I believe I am not a Measure then I am not a Measure, so MD is not true *of* my world; were MD false *in* my world (for me) but not *of* my world, Protagoras should accept that I would have to be wrong *simpliciter* about whether I am a Measure or not. But on GR I am a Measure also of my being a Measure or not: either I am a Measure so I am not a Measure insofar I believe I am not, or I am not a Measure insofar as I believe I am not a Measure, even though I am; in both cases, MD is false *simpliciter* because I am *not* a Measure. It may seem that the argument begs the question by reading MD according to too "objective" a notion of true-for-S, but it is Protagoras who *malgré lui* needs to commit to the notion of falsity *simpliciter* despite his efforts to rule it out: indeed, he cannot allow that there are objectively true facts about the relation between my beliefs and their truth-values, facts that I ignore or about which I may even have false beliefs! But this follows from MD being true *of* my world but not *in* my world (= for me). In case MD is not true either *of* my world or *in* my world, *a fortiori* MD is false, at least as a universal claim about everyone and everything. In any event, Burnyeat's critics are right in that this is not Socrates's *explicit* argument, but the Especially Clever Feature Argument could be couched in these terms: the Opponents say «we do not concede we are Measures, not even of our belief that you are false in taking us to be Measures (= you're wrong about MD full stop, you're not wrong for us)», therefore Protagoras must admit either that they are wrong full stop in not conceding this, or that they are right full stop, and both moves would be fatal in committing him to MD's being false full stop.

it were (also) against the view "All beliefs are true for those who have them" (REL). Now the alternative (A)/(B) makes some further decisive moves: it checks how things are to be, under MD, *for* Protagoras himself *about* MD itself as a belief, and the target becomes *Global Relativism* (G-REL), i.e. "MD (REL) is true for those who believe it". If neither Protagoras nor the others believed MD (A), MD would not be true; if he did believe it but the others did not (B), then b1) MD is less true than false anyway (*Quantitative Argument*) and b2) even Protagoras disbelieved MD (*Especially Clever Feature Argument*), so (A) is the inescapable option – MD is not true in any sense.

There is a progression from an *objective* to a *qualified* to a *self-applied* version of MD on the one hand, and a transition from *interpersonal* to *intrapersonal* conflict of beliefs on the other. Now, the (A)/(B) alternative is valid *under the assumption* of MD (= REL, or qualified version, = (iv)): it is only if MD holds, that MD not being believed by anyone entails MD not being true (*for* anyone) (= A), *and* that MD being more disbelieved than believed amounts to MD being more false than true (= b1). The nature of such an assumption is quite intriguing, since (A)/(B) *prima facie* seems to tell us what would happen if MD *objectively* held, but in fact it tells us what a subject who believes MD should *believe*: this strange "oscillation" is a rhetorical effect with speculative significance, because it makes us realize that if MD "held" it would hold *qua* believed, and if *we* believed that MD holds, we should also believe that it holds *for us* rather than "objectively".

Protagoras originally asserts MD as if it was a *universal truth* about how things work for everyone's appearance and beliefs (= QR), not just for his own appearances and beliefs; at least it is in this spirit that he is imagined by Socrates to support MD with an ontological setting (= SD) which is at least as objective as MD, i.e. with a description of the subject/object relation which purports to transcend the beliefs and appearances of himself and of any given subject at a given time. Indeed, SD also "holds" for those who do *not* believe it (just like MD, and with analogous troubles of consistency). We have seen that if MD is INF, then it cannot consistently be a universal truth, according to the first, intuitive reading of (1)–(3). Socrates then introduces the qualifiers in (i)–(iv) but does not consider the case of (Broad) MD being REL *and* QR: in this case, *most* beliefs are true for those who have them, but some other beliefs are true/false *simpliciter*; to begin with, MD is true *simpliciter*, SD is true *simpliciter*, but indefinitely many other beliefs must be true *simpliciter*, as "notMD is false *simpliciter*", "if the wine appears sweet to Socrates, then it is sweet for Socrates", "if the wind appears cold to Theaetetus, then it is cold for Theaetetus", and on and on. We would have a "traditional" account of [true] and [false] and, alongside it, a qualified account of those terms for another set of objects and

respective beliefs, but MD would perhaps gain abstract logical consistency at the price of losing any radicality and philosophical interest: the divide between beliefs that are T/F *simpliciter* and beliefs that are T/F for a subject would be arbitrary, MD would no longer be a theory that captures what truth *as such* consists of (*Truth* was the title of Protagoras' work), man would not be the Measure of *all* things (but maybe of *most* things). Such a "middle" MD (broader than Narrow MD but narrower than Broad MD), for which all perceptions and many-but-not-all beliefs are true for the respective subject, is not Protagoras's proposal but at the very least an undesired consequence of it, so we cannot charge Socrates or Plato with having disregarded this option in the Self-Refutation Argument.[61] Broad MD, if it is REL, takes the form of GR.[62] A self-applied version of MD brings with it Protagoras's oscillation between interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict: he cannot say anything to oppose his Opponents, but in this way he realizes a sort of opposition with himself. By denying genuine interpersonal conflict he realizes this very conflict and such a conflict becomes *ipso facto* a conflict with himself, an intrapersonal conflict. Through him returning underground, back to where he had popped up – according to the last grotesque image with which Socrates closes the Self-Refutation Argument (171d1–5) – we are invited to overcome this intrapersonal conflict as a step of *our* intellectual path to be left behind. As the Self-Refutation Argument develops, we are "absorbed" into the subjective attitude of Protagoras himself and the logical and dialectical dimension come to be embedded into a *phenomenological* dimension. Indeed, this happens with the transition from interpersonal to intrapersonal conflict that is fully realized by (b2) and makes us retrospectively reconsider the whole (A)/(B) alternative. Protagoras himself needs to oscillate in a loop between an objective affirmation of MD (= QR) and a qualified affirmation of it (= GR): (b2) shows that his qualified affirmation of MD brings him to disbelieve MD; given the interpersonal,

61 This version of MD (REL + QR) would be not self-refuting, because Protagoras could admit that the Opponent is wrong *simpliciter* in believing that MD is false: neither MD nor its negation would be among the beliefs which must be qualifiedly true indeed. That MD is a universal thesis is clear from the fact that Socrates even seems to *concede* that both for perceptual and for moral-axiological properties (just, holy, beautiful) MD may hold (171d9–e8, 172a1–b8), and considers the impossibility of relativizing *some* properties (as useful/dangerous) as a fatal objection to MD as such.

62 One's judgement could be wrong about one's own perceptions not being infallible or not having a subject-indexed truth (Narrow MD), i.e. I could well have a wrong epistemology of perception in disbelieving that each perception of mine must be true – perhaps a truth depending on objective ontological facts (= SD) I ignore – but if I disbelieved that all *beliefs* of mine (Broad MD *and* GR) must be true, then I will have to be paradoxically *right* also for one who believes MD (for Protagoras).

dialectical conflict with an opponent, an intrapersonal, "phenomenological" conflict arises, with the effect that he comes to disbelieve MD. *His* conflict is *our* conflict but also Socrates's conflict: although it is often suggested that the SRA only shows Protagoras's self-defeat in a *dialectical* context rather than a *logical* self-refutation of his view,[63] I suggest that the *phenomenological* level is as relevant as the dialogical one. The whole *Theaetetus* continuously invites us to a retrospective reading in which so many "anticipations" or "prefigurations" find their proper significance only *ex post facto*, by looking back to them after having conquered a new level of awareness, and each level overcome leaves positive elements such as to testify that no refutation is merely deconstructive (this is a nuclear meta-message of the *Theaetetus*). Now, the above-mentioned broadening of MD as putting in trouble both MD itself and KP (which had been read through MD and SD) is a prelude to the decisive step of positing *the soul* instead of the bodily perceptual organs as the genuine cognitive subject both of perceptual and non-perceptual cognition.[64]

Successively, *belief* is isolated from sensation and appearance to be characterized as the outcome of discursive thought (διάνοια), and the latter is in turn defined as nothing else than «*dialogue of the soul with itself*».[65] This is not a metaphor or a loose analogy; instead, thought exhibits all normative structures of argumentative interpersonal dialogue, consisting of questioning, responding, committing, trying to offer a definition and then objecting, checking internal consistency, and finally overcoming doubts (when possible) and taking a given stand about a given topic or proposition – it is an intrapersonal dialogue. The dialogical nature of thought is much more emphasized by scholars than its specular counterpart, namely, that dialogue is a sort of interpersonal thought, the exteriorized counterpart of the inner dynamics of living thinking. All of this means that not only does MD make dialectical practice, refutation and maieutics into a nonsense,[66] but it also makes *thinking as such* into a nonsense, and this is why MD is to be "phenomenologically" self-overcome through "immanent criticism" by the very same thinking which endorses it. This is what I mean by saying that Protagoras's conflict is and must become our (and Socrates's) conflict; in order to leave MD behind, not only do we need to refute it logically as though it was a standard "false" theory about some worldly domain, we also need to "pass through" it subjectively, or phenomenologically,

63 Cf. CASTAGNOLI (2004), (2010), on Protagoras being refuted only as a partner of a dialectical exchange; WATERLOW (1977) points out that through SR he reduces himself to «a dialectical nothing».

64 184b7–186b1.

65 189e6–190a6.

66 On this aspect cf. LONG (2004).

so to speak – *try* to believe it and see what happens. What happens, among other things, is that such a view collapses as soon as our thought takes it at face value and considers the consequences of it, so we just *cannot keep believing it*; there is really no need for an empirical opponent to trigger the process of self-defeat; critical, self-conscious thinking suffices. The very thinking process is grounded in an original distinction between what *seems* to us first, and what is in fact the case; the very breath of discursive thought is the strenuous attempt to rationally reconcile what seems to us with what is actually the case – beyond the immediacy of sensible certainty – an attempt we call inquiry and put forward both by ourselves and with others. What Protagoras takes for universally granted *ab origine*, is the target of a mission instead: the truth must become *for us*, we must become measures (of what we have come to know). The last image of Protagoras popping up out of the ground to refute Socrates and then ducking down and rushing off illustrates the impossibility for Protagoras to put his view (MD) in opposition to Socrates's view (notMD) without instantaneously ceasing to be an opponent thereby (if he was, MD would be *ipso facto* violated).[67] But of course the relevant result is not just that Protagoras cannot genuinely believe MD but principally that *we* cannot genuinely believe MD, and we arrive this outcome only by passing through MD. I think that such an image closes the Self-Refutation Argument as a vivid representation of what has just happened, i.e. as a plastic, figurative recap of the Self-Refutation Argument itself: Protagoras has been exhumed only to be buried again, his view has been temporarily made our view in order for us phenomenologically – not only logically and dialectically – to get rid of it, to go beyond it "from inside". Socrates adds a last significant comment before going beyond SR: «but we have to make do with ourselves as we are, and always say *what seems to us to be the case* (τὰ δοκοῦντα ἀεὶ ταῦτα λέγειν, 171d5)». Ironically enough, Socrates says that he and Theodorus, though not being as wise as Protagoras, cannot avoid saying what seems to them to be the case: Protagoras would protest because … they said what seemed to them to be the case, but this is just what he said to be always true, and this is why he cannot but stop protesting! There is a "humble" and fertile sense in which what seems to us is "true for us", which is not Protagoras's relativistic sense: we always take the truth to be what seems to us according to the available evidence – for each belief we have, we *do* take this belief to

67 In this grotesque return of Protagoras, no new objection is specified because none is possible: the claim of MD brings with itself the «refusal to submit in a dialectical discussion» (cf. BURNYEAT 1976, p. 191). The Self-Refutation Argument is an example of "negative maieutics", a self-destruction – or a self-abortion – that Socrates elenctically brings into view without adding external positive contents.

be true – but we must be prepared to "kill" our "babies" in the face of new evidence, objections, refutations or other occasions of learning so as to become less ignorant or "wiser" than before. This is what Socrates helps Theaetetus to do and the *Theaetetus* helps us to do, at least concerning the issue, what is knowledge.

Those who are familiar with the copious secondary literature will have noticed that my reconstruction of the Self-Refutation Argument is pretty "ecumenic": both parties in the *Infallibilism/Relativism querelle* are partially right, insofar as Plato charges the ambiguity onto "his" Protagoras; the same holds for the readings of Protagoras' view as a *Qualified* Relativism (a universal claim objectively true) or a *Global* Relativism (a claim subject to the same limitation it attributes to any belief/appearance whatsoever), since in my view the oscillation between them is charged onto Protagoras as well. SRA is a whole structured and rigorous argument whose retrospective "modified" construals are rhetorically induced by Plato himself and make it "hospitable" so as to contain refutations of different (and incompatible) readings of the targeted claim. The argument is successful and can be fully appreciated only if we do not abstractly tell apart the logical-, the dialectical-, the rhetorical- and the phenomenological dimensions of it. Each step prepares the following one – from (1)–(3) to (i)–(iv) to (A)/(B), within which, in turn, the *Quantitative Argument* prepares the *Especially Clever Feature Argument*, which I have argued it works on both the textual readings I have labeled *lectio* a and *lectio* b. Protagoras' original sin is that of taking any cognitive episode as a kind of perception:[68] this is what makes MD plausible, in itself, as a declination of KP, and as supported by SD; but the very broadening of MD – progressively introduced through apparently "innocent" anticipations (see *supra*) – as to include judgmental states and abstract/universal cognitive objects, makes the view collapse as it is not covered by SD anymore: of course such an inadequateness in cognitive psychology (disregarding the soul as a cognitive subject, and its non-perceptual states) will more explicitly emerge only later in the dialogue, as will the correlative ontological insufficiency (disregarding the non-perceptual objects, such as the «common features» or κοινά).

The original Measure-Doctrine claim was probably meant by the historical Protagoras as a gnomic statement to be taken not literally but according to that oracular, obscure and ambivalent language the Presocratic philosophy

68 Interestingly enough, in *De An.* III 3, 427a19–b6 Aristotle recognizes the implication: if (as the «Ancients» held) thinking was perception, then «all appearances would be true, as some hold» (427b2–3; "some" are the Protagoreans).

inherited by the religious register.[69] But this does not entail any unfairness or misunderstanding on the part of Plato: the elenctic treatment of any however "rich" sentence involves an exercise of disambiguation and of eventual multiplication of determinate meanings or "theories" a given sentence can virtually contain; was the original MD a "positive theory" or an enigmatic rule of thumb, the aim of Plato is not historical exegesis but the individuation of one or more unambiguous claims to be critically taken at face-value, such that if one assumes one of them she is normatively committed to accept other propositions entailed by it; and this accounts for him seeming to be refuting different views at a time. It is the very elenctic treatment, that by inferential articulation makes explicit all a given sentence *may* mean – as it happens, for example, with the word «*logos*» when the third proposal of definition (K as «*true opinion with* logos») is taken at face-value: often Socrates' interlocutors *come to learn* what they *really* believe through addressing his objections or requests of clarification, and sometimes they come to be refuted in various ways, *qua* holding different (and even incompatible) declinations of their original claim: this does not mean that Socrates misunderstands them; in any case, what ultimately matters is testing whether a given view is true and justified or at least "fertile",[70] independently of whether and by whom it has been historically held.

References

ADEMOLLO, F. (2018). On Plato's Conception of Change. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 55, pp. 55–83,

ARONADIO, F. (2016). *L'*aisthesis *e le strategie argomentative di Platone nel* Teeteto. Bibliopolis. Napoli.

69 This is brilliantly argued by ZILIOLI (2016): Protagoras formulates his relativism «by hints and allusions» (p. 204), by "showing" rather than by "saying", and MD would be «a rule of thumb adumbrating an outlook without giving a precise description of it» (p. 209). On Plato as a problematic source of the historical Protagoras, cf. MACÉ (2013).

70 A view can well be neither true nor justified but fertile, i.e. truth-conducive (in the hands of the right interlocutors): it is the case of Protagoras' MD, as well as of Theaetetus' KP indeed; though ultimately untenable, MD leaves some central issues on the table of the discussion: first of all, the issue of *falsity*, which needs be faced in depth in order to get what knowledge could ever be (Protagoras was right at least in having "troubles" with conceiving of a false cognitive state), and the idea that knowledge must consist of a sort of *direct* touch with the known reality, something *analogous* to the way perception literally gets us in touch with perceived particulars (although realizing this goes beyond the *Theaetetus*).

BEMELMANS, R. (2002). Why does Protagoras Rush Off? Self-Refutation and Haste in Plato, «Theaetetus» 169a–171d. *Ancient Philosophy*, XXII, pp. 75–86.

BOSTOCK, D. (1988). *Plato's* Theaetetus. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

BROWN, L. (2018). Rethinking Agreement in Plato. In: BRINK, D.O.; MEYER, S.S.; SHIELD, CH. (eds.). *Virtue, Happiness, Knowledge. Themes from the Work of Gail Fine and Terence Irwin*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, pp. 18–32.

BUCKELS, C. (2016). The Ontology of the Secret Doctrine in Plato's «Theaetetus». *Phronesis*, LXI, pp. 243–259.

BURNYEAT, M. (1976). Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's «Theaetetus». *Philosophical Review*, LXXXVI, pp. 172–195.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

CASTAGNOLI, L. (2004). Protagoras Refuted: How Clever is Socrates «Most Clever» Argument at «Theaetetus» 171a–c? *Topoi*, XXIII, pp. 3–32.

CASTAGNOLI, L. (2010). Self-Refutation and Dialectic: Plato. In: Id., *Ancient Self-Refutation. The Logic and the History of Self-Refutation Argument from Plato to Augustine*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Mass., pp. 40–66.

CHAPPELL, T. (2005). *Reading Plato's* Theaetetus. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

CHAPPELL, T. (2006). Reading the περιτροπή: «Theaetetus» 170c–171c. *Phronesis*, LI, pp. 109–139.

CORNFORD, F.M. (2003). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge. The* Theaetetus *and the* Sophist. Dover. New York (ed. or. 1935).

EMILSSON, E.K. (1994). Plato's Self-Refutation Argument in «Theaetetus» 170c–171c Revised. *Phronesis*, XXXIX, pp. 136–149.

FERRARI, F. (2011). *Platone: Teeteto*. BUR. Milano.

FINE, G. (1996). Conflicting Appearances: «Theaetetus» 153d–154b, in: GILL, C.; MCCABE; M.M. (eds.). *Form and Argument in Late Plato*. Clarendon Press. Oxford, pp. 105–133.

FINE, G. (1998). Plato's Refutation of Protagoras in the «Theaetetus». *Apeiron*, XXXI, pp. 201–234.

GLIDDEN, D. (1975). Protagorean Relativism and the Cyrenaics. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 9, pp. 113–140.

HINTIKKA, J. (1967). Time, Truth, and Knowledge in Ancient Greek Philosophy. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, n. 4, pp. 1–14.

IOPPOLO, A.M. (1999). *Platone. Teeteto*. Laterza. Roma-Bari.

KEELING, E. (2015). Truth for a Person and Truth for a Polis: A Note on 171a1–6. *Ancient Philosophy*, XXXV, pp. 63–73.

KETCHUM, R.J. (1992). Plato's «Refutation» of Protagorean Relativism: «Theaetetus» 170–171. *Oxford Studies of Ancient Philosophy*, X, pp. 73–105.

LEE, E.N. (2000). The Secret Doctrine: Plato's Defence of Protagoras in the «Theaetetus». *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, XIX, pp. 47–86.

LEE, E.N. (2005). *The Epistemology After Protagoras. Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle and Democritus*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

LONG, A. (2004). Refutation and Relativism in «Theaetetus» 161–171. *Phronesis*, XLIX, pp. 24–40.

MACÉ, A. (2013). Privatising Perception: Plato's Protagoreanism (Theaetetus 154 B–157C). In: Id., *Protagoras of Abdera. The Man, his Measure*. OPHUIJSEN, J.M.; VAN RAALTE, M.; STORK, P. (eds.), Brill. Leiden-Boston, pp. 195–216.

MAGUIRE, J.P. (1973). Protagoras – or Plato? *Phronesis*, 18, pp. 115–136.

MATTHEN, M. (1985). Perception, Relativism and Truth: Reflections of Plato's *Theaetetus* 152–160. *Dialogue*, XXIV, 33–58.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato: Theaetetus*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

NARCY, M. (1994). *Platon. Théétète*. Flammarion. Paris.

NARCY, M. (2002). Doxazein: "opinare" o "giudicare"?. In: CASERTANO, G. (ed.). *Il* Teeteto *di Platone: strutture e problematiche*. Loffredo. Napoli, pp. 7–23.

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism. Text and Subtext in Plato's* Theaetetus. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

TIGNER, S.S. (1971). The «Exquisite Argument» at «Tht» 171a. *Mnemosyne*, XXIV, pp. 366–369.

TRABATTONI, F. (2016). *Essays on Plato's Epistemology*. Leuven University Press. Leuven.

TRABATTONI, F. (2018). *Platone: Teeteto* (traduzione a cura di A. Capra), Einaudi, Torino.

TRABATTONI, F. (2020). *Peritrope* Once Again. In: BOSSI, B.; ROBINSON, T.M. (eds.), *Plato'* Theaetetus *Revisited*. DeGruyter. Berlin, pp. 89–106.

WATERLOW, S. (1977). Protagoras and Inconsistency: «Theaetetus» 171a6–c7. *Archiv für Gheschichte der Philosophie*, LIX, pp. 19–39.

WEDIN, M. (2005). Animadversions on Burnyeat's «Theaetetus»: On the Logic of the Exquisite Argument. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, XXXIX, pp. 171–191.

ZILIOLI, U. (2007). Inconsistency, Self-Refutation and the Heart of the Matter. In: Id., *Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism. Plato's Subtlest Enemy*. Routledge. London and New York, pp. 199–247.

SECTION 3

Maieutics, Sophistry, Philosophy

CHAPTER 7

Socratic Midwifery and Noble Sophistry: An Intertextual Reading

Zina Giannopoulou

In the sixth definition of the sophist in *Sophist* 226b–231b, the Eleatic Visitor defines noble sophistry via an appeal to four elements – the *technē* itself, its aim, method, and effects. Noble sophistry is (1) the art of cleansing the soul of those suffering from doxosophy, i.e. the condition of thinking they are saying something although they are saying nothing, with a view to (2) curing them from doxosophy by (3) resolving doxastic conflicts so that (4) they may finally get angry at themselves, calmer toward others, and free from the arrogant belief that they know what they do not know. Given the *prima facie* similarities between Socratic elenchus and sophistic refutation, scholars have long been divided between those who see the noble sophistry as a species of sophistry and those who see it as an oblique reference to Socrates' elenctic method. In an earlier article (2001), I argued that the Visitor's definition of noble sophistry is ambiguous because it leaves underdetermined the noble sophist's epistemic qualifications. In this article, I argue that an intertextual reading between the Socratic midwifery of *Theaetetus*, an art in many ways similar to the Socratic elenchus, and the noble sophistry of *Sophist* shows that the two practices differ in important respects. My reading has two main advantages. First, it brings two dialogues traditionally seen as middle-late/late into a mutually illuminating exchange around the important issue of distinguishing noble sophistry from Socrates' mental obstetrics; and secondly, it brings together the passage on mental midwifery with three other methodological passages in *Theaetetus*, and thus enriches our picture of Socrates' obstetric role in the dialogue. The paper is divided into three sections. In section 1, I explore the Visitor's definition of noble sophistry and reiterate the main points of my earlier paper on noble sophistry; in section 2, I look at Socrates' description of mental midwifery in conjunction with three subsequent methodological moments in *Theaetetus* – moments where Socrates discusses sophistically inflected methods of conversation either in his own obstetric persona or in the personas of imaginary or absent sophists. I end with conclusions in section 3.

1 Noble Sophistry

In *Sophist*, the Visitor employs the «method of division» – or, more accurately, of «collection and division» – described in *Phaedrus* and early on in *Philebus* to define the sophist. The definition of noble sophistry is the sixth of seven attempts to seize this «beast of manifold devices» whose entrapment has been most difficult.[1] In the first five partially successful definitions, for which the Visitor used the art of acquisition (κτητικὴ τέχνη), the sophist is turned out to be a hunter of rich and prominent young men in order to receive a wage for speaking persuasively to them about virtue; an importer of learning for the mind; a retailer of learning for the soul; a vendor of learning of his own manufacture; and an athlete in argument who makes eristics his specialty (231d–e). In these preliminary definitions, the sophist emerges as a professed teacher of virtue who desires wealth and employs eristics as a method of attracting young men to his audience. The sixth definition (226b–231b) is intended to secure capture by means of the art of separation (τέχνη διακριτική), but the Visitor's appraisal of its outcome is lukewarm:

> VISITOR: Well, then, who are we going to say the people who apply this form of expertise are? I'm afraid to call them sophists.
> THEAETETUS: Why?
> VISITOR: So we don't pay sophists too high an honor.
> THEAETETUS: But there's a similarity between a sophist and what we've been talking about.
> VISITOR: And between a wolf and a dog, the wildest thing there is and the gentlest. If you're going to be safe, you have to be especially careful about similarities since the type we're talking about is very slippery.
> *Soph.* 230e–231a

The sophist and the noble sophist have turned out to be as similar as the wolf and the dog, a result of a method that reveals similarities between different concepts and breeds. The Visitor's reservation about the soundness of the sixth definition bespeaks the limitations of the method of separation that he used

1 There is an ambiguity concerning the overall number of definitions. Technically, this is the Visitor's fifth attempt to define the sophist, but in his summary of definitions at 231d–e, he splits up the third definition (224d–e) into two parts, «retailer of learning for the mind» and «vendor of learning of his own manufacture» (231d). From this vantage, this is his sixth definition, and modern scholarship follows this enumeration.

for the capture of the noble sophist. Before we discuss these limitations, let us look at the four essential parameters of noble sophistry. They are as follows:

(A1) ***Technē***: Noble sophistry is the art of cleansing the soul that leaves «what is better» (τὸ βέλτιον, 226d) and throws out «what is worse» or «badness» (τὸ χεῖρον, 226d; κακίας, 227d). The Visitor calls this art of psychic cleansing «cross-questioning» (230b) and elenchus (230d).
(A2) Aim: The noble sophist is a soul-physician that cures the soul from the wickedness that is «discord and sickness of the soul» (στάσιν καὶ νόσον τῆς ψυχῆς, 228b), namely, the ignorance of thinking that one knows what one does not know. When this ignorance occurs «alone» (μόνον, 228d), it is not a form of psychic wickedness, an intriguing comment that the Visitor fails to pursue further. The noble sophist cleanses the ignorant soul because he thinks that it will not benefit from any learning unless it is purged of this kind of ignorance (230c–d). The cleansed soul believes that it knows only the things that it does know.
(A3) Method: The noble sophist scrutinizes his interlocutors' opinions, collects them, puts them side by side, and shows that they conflict (ἐναντίας) with one another at the same time, on the same subjects, in relation to the same things, and in the same respects (230b). The resolution of doxastic conflicts leaves the soul cleansed.
(A4) Effects: Noble sophists cause their patients to become angry at themselves (ἑαυτοῖς μὲν χαλεπαίνουσι) and calmer toward others (πρὸς δὲ τοὺς ἄλλους ἡμεροῦνται), as well as to shed their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves. These epistemic and affective changes have a lasting effect on them (230b–c).

By putting (**A1**)–(**A4**) together in one statement, we obtain the following definition: noble sophistry is the art of psychic cleansing that cures a person from the ignorance of thinking that he knows what he does not know by showing that his opinions conflict with one another at the same time, on the same subjects, in relation to the same thing, and in the same respects, resulting in anger toward himself, gentleness towards others, and the loss of his inflated and rigid beliefs.

Noble sophistry has been interpreted mainly in two ways. Kerferd claimed that it is similar to the Socratic method of Plato's earlier dialogues, but argued that noble sophists are sophists since Plato saw «one aspect of [the sophists'] activities as not only extremely valuable but as a necessary preliminary to his own philosophy».[2] Other scholars have stressed the affinities between

2 KERFERD (1954), p. 84.

noble sophistry and the Socratic elenchus, focusing on the methodological, epistemological, and ethical connections between the two practices.[3] In an article published twenty years ago, I adopted a middle position between these two camps with tentative leanings toward Kerferd's view. There I argued that the referent of the sixth definition is deliberately vague because the Visitor's goal is to gesture to the difficulty of specifying the epistemic qualifications that the genuine elenctician (Socrates) must possess in order to be distinguished from his counterfeit (sophist). This vagueness results from the use of the art of separation, uniquely employed in the sixth definition, which is concerned with the similarities (ὁμοιότητες) and kinships (συγγένειαι) among various kinds of expertise rather than with the appropriateness or well-fittingness (εὐπρέπεια) of their names (227c).[4]

The art of separation enables its user to «first divide and then gather together concepts which he finds *akin* to one another», striving to arrive at an understanding «by means of collecting *semantically related* concepts».[5] This method, I suggested, is too crude to allow for essential semantic distinctions of the key concept of cross-questioning or elenchus in order to formulate a clear definition of it.[6] Such distinctions might, for example, illuminate the grounds for determining the difference between «the better» and «the worse» psychic material; stress the productive role of shame in refutation (as opposed to the debilitating embarrassment caused by sophists); and illuminate the idea of doxastic conflict by addressing the difference between thought- and verbal contradiction. The murkiness in which the Visitor envelops important parts of his discussion suggests the limits of his art – he is unable to be more probing and precise in formulating his sixth definition than his art of separation allows him to be.

Nevertheless, if I had to choose between Socrates and the sophist as the *likeliest implicit* referent of the sixth definition, I would opt for the sophist for two contextually relevant reasons, one retrospective and the other prospective. Given the «strongly negative impression which the previous five definitions have created concerning the teaching qualifications of the sophist, the activity of the "sophist of noble lineage" can be seen, in retrospect, as part of

3 See CORNFORD (1935), pp. 177–83; HACKFORTH (1946), pp. 118–20; TREVASKIS (1955), pp. 36–49; NARCY (2007), pp. 196–8; and recently DORION (2012), pp. 252–3 with bibliography.

4 The only other place in the Platonic corpus, besides the *Seventh Letter*, where εὐπρέπεια is used is *Euthydemus* 305e, in a context that addresses the sophist's *doxosophy* and contrasts εὐπρέπεια as «plausibility» with ἀλήθεια.

5 GIANNOPOULOU (2001), p. 108 (emphasis added).

6 For a detailed discussion of the Visitor's vagueness and its potential causes see GIANNOPOULOU (2001).

an intellectual game devoid of seriousness because vague as to its intentions». In the context of the six definitions of the sophist thus far, the noble sophist appears to be like «an intelligent but mischievous child who, while conversing with others less gifted but nonetheless conceited individuals, disabuses them of their false beliefs which they mistook for knowledge».[7] The prospective reason takes into account the function of the sixth definition as bridge between the first five definitions of the sophist as pseudo-teacher of virtue (δοξοπαιδευτική) and the Visitor's summation of him as unable to teach because he «has a kind of belief-knowledge about everything but not truth» (δοξαστικὴν ἄρα τινὰ περὶ πάντων ἐπιστήμην ὁ σοφιστὴς … ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀλήθειαν ἔχων, 233c). This summation will be echoed in the final definition of the sophist at the very end of the dialogue, where he is said to be a man who, though aware that he does not know anything, produces in words totally inadequate «copies» of the truth, which he makes appear to others to be truth, even though they are false. The sixth definition thus paves the way for the seventh definition by «hint[ing] at the sophist's intellectual emptiness – he can conceivably be seen as a δοξόσοφος and therefore on a par with a pompous student».[8] Qua pretend-knower, the sophist is finally shown to be ignorant of the things he claims to know and thus in need of the noble sophist's cleansing. Note the paradox yielded by the Visitor's vague terminology: both the one in need of cleansing and the one administering the cleansing are nominally sophists! The Visitor cannot resolve this paradox other than by calling the latter «noble sophist». To see how it can be resolved, we need to turn to *Theaetetus* and its description of Socratic midwifery as *both* similar to *and* materially different from noble sophistry.

2 Socratic Midwifery

In *Theaetetus*, Socrates poses as the midwife of the intellect, a persona that he adopts uniquely here. His ignorance and the elenctic character of mental midwifery are presented as two sides of the same coin. Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is a staple of the early aporetic dialogues and not entirely absent from the non-aporetic ones, but in *Theaetetus*, compared with other dialogues of the same chronological group, it appears as a distinctive feature of his philosophical method. This is hardly surprising since, as I argued elsewhere, the main concern of *Theaetetus* is to differentiate Socrates from the sophists by means of a philosophically sophisticated elaboration of his elenctic persona

7 GIANNOPOULOU (2001), p. 123.
8 GIANNOPOULOU (2001), p. 124.

in *Apology*.[9] What better place, then, than *Theaetetus*, a dialogue of the same chronological group as *Sophist*, and what better persona than the mental midwife for examining afresh the similarities and salient differences between the noble elenctician of *Sophist* and the barren midwife of *Theaetetus*?

Let us first look at the essential parameters of Socratic midwifery (149a–151d), along the lines of our earlier sketch of noble sophistry:

(B1) ***Technē***: Mental obstetrics is Socrates' divinely assisted art (149a, 150b–d, 151b, 161e, 184b, 210b–c) of determining spiritual pregnancy and delivering the pregnant interlocutor of his spiritual offspring. Judging by the mentally pregnant Theaetetus, spiritual pregnancy manifests itself in a person's inability to persuade himself that anything he or another says about any topic will really do, and in his helpless worry about being in a state of ignorance (148e). Socrates' pregnant associates «suffer the pains of labor and are filled day and night with distress» (151a). Spiritual midwives are also reliable matchmakers (150a). Hence, Socrates sends those who do not seem to him to be pregnant to Prodicus and other «wise and inspired persons» (151b; cf. 149d) to be inseminated before deciding whether to take them on himself as associates.
(B2) Aim: Though barren of wisdom, the mental midwife can determine «whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth» (150c). It is hard to distinguish truths from falsities, but the spiritual obstetrician can apply all possible tests to determine the offspring's epistemic value (150b), so that those delivered of phantoms «don't think they know what they don't know» (210c).
(B3) Method: The midwife Socrates examines souls by «always asking questions of other people but never expressing his own views about anything» (150c). Like medical obstetricians, he can arouse or diminish labor pains with drugs and incantations, induce delivery, and cause an abortion.[10] Theaetetus has often heard Socrates being described as «a very odd sort of person (ἀτοπώτατος), always causing people to get into difficulties (ἀπορεῖν)» (149a), and this is the popular understanding of his secret art of midwifery.
(B4) Effects: Those who stay with Socrates may at first seem ignorant and stupid, but over time they make progress due to «the multitude of things they discover within themselves» (150d). Some of those whom Socrates disabuses of false beliefs proceed to leave him for a «harmful company» with the result that their fetus miscarries, or they neglect and lose the children that Socrates

9 GIANNOPOULOU (2013).
10 For the comparison of Socrates' questioning to incantations for the soul see *Charmides* 156d, 175e, 176b.

helped them to bring forth and are «set down for ignorant fools (ἔδοξαν ἀμαθεῖς εἶναι), both by themselves and by everybody else» (150e). Others get so angry with him for disabusing them of false beliefs «as to be literally ready to bite» (151c). However, with Theaetetus things will be different. As Socrates predicts at the end of the dialogue, if the youth remains barren, his companions will find him «gentler» (ἡμερώτερος) and less tiresome, as well as not thinking that he knows what he does not know (210c).

By putting (**B1**)–(**B4**) together in one statement, we obtain the following definition of Socrates' obstetrics: mental midwifery is the divinely assisted art of establishing pregnancy and delivering the offspring with a view to determining truth from falsities by asking questions and causing aporia, resulting in people's making progress over time by discovering truths in themselves, or in their leaving Socrates for harmful companies, or in getting angry with him. If Theaetetus remains barren, he will be gentler and less tiresome toward others, as well as free from doxosophy, the conceit of knowing what he does not know.

A preliminary comparison between the definitions of noble sophistry and Socratic midwifery shows that there are important similarities *and* differences between them. The similarities pertain to ***technē*** (**A1 and B1**); **aim** (**A2 and B2**); and **effects** (**A4 and B4**). Both the noble sophist and the midwife Socrates remove psychic entities, whether removal is seen as purging the soul of «what is worse» or as delivering the psychic fetus. However, mental midwives can assess psychic pregnancy, whereas noble sophists seem to assume doxosophy and work toward eliminating it. Furthermore, mental midwives need not eliminate the psychic fetus since some associates discover great things in themselves. The practitioners' aims and effects are the same *only* when the noble sophist's patients are compared to Theaetetus in the future. Noble sophists aim to disabuse their patients of their ignorance qua belief that they know what they don't know, and thanks to Socrates' ministrations the barren Theaetetus will not think he knows what he does not know. Freed from ignorance, the noble sophists' patients «grow gentler towards others» (230b), just as Theaetetus will become «gentler» (210c), should he remain sterile as a consequence of Socrates' midwifery.[11]

Noble sophistry and mental obstetrics differ mostly with respect to their aims (**A2** and **B2**) and commonly observed effects (**A4 and B4**). Whereas the mental midwife aims to tell apart truth from lies, the noble sophist intends to cure ignorance as doxosophy. The mental midwife removes false beliefs as constitutive of doxosophy, whereas the noble sophist cleanses people in order

11 Cf. BROWN (2018), pp. 94–5.

to remove doxosophy as psychic sickness or badness. The former aim is primarily epistemological, the latter primarily ethical, and while these aims are not mutually exclusive, they have different foci, which in the passages on noble sophistry and mental midwifery manifest themselves in their effects on their recipients' affective dispositions. Those cured by the noble sophist are angry at themselves and gentle toward others, presumably because having been purged of badness they are upset with and perhaps ashamed of themselves for having borne it, but kind toward those they meet in their cleansed state. However, «many» (πολλοί, 151c) of those delivered by the midwife Socrates get angry at *him* to the point of wanting to bite him, because his assessment of their mental offspring as false puts them in a «savage» state of prideful ownership, like that of «a mother over her first-born child» (151c).

The only parameter that has been left out of examination thus far is the methods used by the noble sophist and the mental midwife (**A3** and **B3**), which necessarily inform their aims (**A2** and **B2**) and effects (**A4** and **B4**). As described above, these methods do not seem different, and may even appear compatible with one another. The fact that the noble sophist reveals doxastic conflicts and the mental midwife causes aporias suggests that both practitioners lead their associates to intellectual impasse, inducing in them experiences of helplessness and perhaps even distress. To illuminate the ways in which these two practices may be seen as similar, I turn to three methodological interludes in the first part of *Theaetetus* where Socrates imagines how a sophist might debate versus how he should or can debate, and what the sophist Protagoras might tell him and Theaetetus about their reception of his theory, if he were alive and present at the conversation.

The first interlude explores the difference between exposing thought-contradictions, the method of noble sophistry (**A3**), and miring the interlocutor in verbal contradictions, a well-known sophistic practice. When Socrates asks Theaetetus whether he would say that anything can become bigger or more in any way other than by being increased, the youth replies that if he were to answer *in relation to this question*, he would say «no», but if he were to answer in *relation to the previous question* as to whether anything can become different simply by coming into contact with another thing and without any change in itself, in order to avoid contradicting himself he would have to say «yes». Thereupon Socrates exclaims:

> Now if you and I were professional savants (δεινοὶ καὶ σοφοί), who had already analyzed all the contents of our minds, we should now spend our superfluous time trying each other out; we should start a regular Sophists' set-to (σοφιστικῶς εἰς μάχην τοιαύτην) with a great clashing of argument

> on argument (ἀλλήλων τοὺς λόγους τοῖς λόγοις ἐκρούομεν). But, as it is, we are only plain men; and so our first aim will be to look at our thoughts themselves in relation to themselves and see what they are (αὐτὰ πρὸς αὑτὰ τί ποτ᾽ ἐστὶν ἃ διανοούμεθα) – whether, in our opinion, they agree with one another or are entirely at variance (πότερον ἡμῖν ἀλλήλοις συμφωνεῖ ἢ οὐδ᾽ ὁπωστιοῦν).
>
> *Theaet.* 154d–e

Whereas sophists clash arguments on arguments (or words on words) out of a desire to achieve verbal consistency, the midwife Socrates looks at the thoughts delivered during the obstetric event and examines whether they conflict with one another.[12] The sophists' verbal consistency aims at an irrefutable tongue and is achieved by the studied avoidance of *verbal* contradiction from one context to the next – here, from one answer to the next. Socrates, however, aims at an irrefutable mind, a state achieved when *thoughts* agree with one another, irrespective of context. Socrates' interest in doxastic consistency sounds like the noble sophist's method (**A3**), which resolves doxastic conflicts so that *thoughts* may agree at the same time, on the same subjects, in relation to the same things, and in the same respects. But the need for doxastic consistency may also be an aspect of his own midwifery (**B3**).

In the second interlude, Socrates berates himself and Theaetetus for having adopted the method of «professional controversialists» (ἀντιλογικῶς ἐοίκαμεν; also, ἀγωνισταί) by trying to show that a man does not know what he has learned and remembers: when he shuts his eyes after he has seen something, he remembers the thing seen but does not know it because he no longer sees it. In this way, they defeated Protagoras' theory by «getting words to agree consistently» (πρὸς τὰς τῶν ὀνομάτων ὁμολογίας ἀνομολογησάμενοι) (164c–d). The two of them can make even more alarming admissions if they pay little attention to the words in which they express their assertions and denials (165), when, for example, «one of the mercenary skirmishers of debate» (πελταστικὸς ἀνὴρ μισθοφόρος, 165d) poses a question to Theaetetus and demands an answer that obeys the letter of the question (not *how* does it happen that you don't know what you know, but «*does* it happen that you don't know what you know?», 165c), rather than its spirit. By the end, the interlocutor of such a debater is «thoroughly tied up … tamed and bound» (συνεποδίσθης … χειρωσάμενός τε καὶ συνδήσας), before he is set free for a ransom. Socrates has gone from adopting the noble sophist's stance of aiming at doxastic consistency (**A3**) in the first

12 For the sophists' interest in verbal consistency see *Laches* 196b, *Euthydemus* 272a–b, *Gorgias* 470c–472c, 461b, and 482c–483a.

interlude to feigning expert knowledge of how to achieve a sophist's verbal consistency in the second interlude.

The third interlude occurs toward the end of Protagoras' self-defense. Socrates ventriloquizes the dead Protagoras and makes him express views that sound like those of the noble sophist. The crux of Protagoras' admonition to Socrates for the unfair treatment of his theory comes toward the end of his defense, which is worth citing in full:

> Only I beg that you will observe this condition [when you object to my theory]: do not be unjust in your questions. It is the height of unreasonableness that a person who professes to care for moral goodness should be consistently unjust in discussion. I mean by injustice, in this connection, the behavior of a man who «does not take care to keep controversy distinct from discussion» (μὴ χωρὶς μὲν ὡς ἀγωνιζόμενος τὰς διατριβὰς ποιεῖται, χωρὶς δὲ διαλεγόμενος); a man who forgets that in controversy «he may play about and trip up» (παίζῃ τε καὶ σφάλλῃ) his opponent as often as he can, but that in discussion he must be serious, he must keep on helping his opponent to his feet again (ἐπανορθοῖ), and point out to him only those of his slips which are due to himself or to the intellectual society which he has previously frequented. If you observe this distinction, those who associate with you «will blame themselves for their confusion and their difficulties, not you» (ἑαυτοὺς αἰτιάσονται … τῆς αὑτῶν ταραχῆς καὶ ἀπορίας ἀλλ᾽οὐ σέ). They will seek your company and think of you as their friend (καὶ σὲ μὲν διώξονται και φιλήσουσιν); but «they will loathe themselves» (αὑτοὺς δὲ μισήσουσι), and seek refuge from themselves in philosophy, in the hope that they may thereby become different people and be rid forever of the men that they once were. But if you follow the common practice and do the opposite, you will get the opposite results. Instead of philosophers, you will make your companions grow up to be the enemies of philosophy.
>
> *Theaet.* 167e–168b

Here Protagoras *redivivus* assumes the persona of the noble sophist and criticizes Socrates for his sophistic practices: he calls him an unserious controversialist (ἀγωνιζόμενος) who trips up (σφάλλῃ) his interlocutor, instead of helping him to his feet (ἐπανορθοῖ), all flaws that in the second interlude Socrates attributed to himself as practitioner of sophistic agonistic.[13] Should Socrates behave

13 Especially striking are the correlations between the military idiom used by Socrates in 165e, with its references to the victor's tying up, binding, and taming of the vanquished,

like a noble sophist, he will cause his interlocutors to experience the effects of noble sophistry: they will loathe themselves for their mistakes, just as those associating with noble sophists get angry at themselves (**A4**). Otherwise, they will flee him and seek the company of non-philosophers, which is exactly what the midwife Socrates registers as the undesired effect of his obstetrics on some associates (**B4**).

Let us recapitulate our findings in this part of the paper before assessing their import. By mapping the description of mental midwifery onto that of noble sophistry we see that the two arts are both similar to and different from one another in terms of *technē* (**A1** and **B1**), aim (**A2** and **B2**), and effects (**A4** and **B4**). Regarding similarities, the midwife Socrates removes the pregnant interlocutor's mental offspring, just as the noble sophist cleanses the soul from wickedness; the barren Theaetetus at the end of the dialogue is free from doxosophy, just as the noble sophist's associates are cured from doxosophy; Theaetetus will be gentle to others as a result of Socratic midwifery, just as the noble sophist's companions are calm toward others. But Theaetetus is an exceptional lad, quite unlike most of the pregnant youths delivered by the mental midwife. On the basis of Socrates' ordinary psychic deliveries, spiritual midwifery *differs* from noble sophistry. The midwife Socrates can tell whether an interlocutor is pregnant, whereas it is unclear how the noble sophist knows that a person suffers from doxosophy; Socrates determines truths from falsities, but the noble sophist cures doxosophy; Socrates' interlocutors progress over time by finding truths in themselves, or leave him for harmful companies, or get angry with him, while the noble sophist's associates get angry at themselves.

The three self-reflexive interludes offer an oblique commentary on the method of the midwife Socrates (**B3**) by relating it to noble sophistry (**A3**) and sophistry, and by showing how this commentary influences the effects of mental midwifery (**B4**). In the first interlude, Socrates stresses the need for doxastic consistency – the agreement of thoughts with one another, regardless of context, which is what the noble sophist aims to achieve by dissolving doxastic conflicts (**A3**). Although he expresses his disdain for the sophistic practice of verbal consistency, in the second interlude, he chastises himself for achieving such verbal consistency in his treatment of Protagoras' *homo-mensura* doctrine. Finally, in the third interlude, he resurrects Protagoras and makes *him* sound like a noble sophist accusing the sophist Socrates of engaging in unserious controversies and engendering aporias by prizing verbal consistency over

and the wrestling vocabulary used by Protagoras *redivivus* in 167e, where the sophist as winner of the wrestling game trips up and refuses to lift his opponent from the ground.

doxastic consistency (the midwife's (**B3**) now supplied with a sophistic cause of the obstetrically induced aporia), and making his associates hate themselves and flee him (the midwife's (**B4**) now caused by Socrates' sophistic practices).

Our discussion above shows that the midwifery section in *Theaetetus*, where Socrates describes the four essential parameters of his art, supports the view that spiritual midwifery differs from noble sophistry in aim and effects: it distinguishes truths from falsities and tends to make those it disabuses of false beliefs angry at the midwife. Secondary differences include the divine support of midwifery, which ensures the infallibility of its epistemic results, and the successful deliveries that it performs, which often get lost due to the associates' subsequent intellectual companies. Other than the fact that both mental midwifery and noble sophistry are *technai* that remove epistemic items, other similarities between them emerge in the case of Theaetetus at the end of the dialogue (210c), where Socrates predicts that the youth will be gentler towards others in the future. But most of Socrates' pregnant associates are unlike the extraordinarily precocious Theaetetus, so the differences in aim between mental midwifery and noble sophistry, as well as the effects associated with that aim, predominate.

The three interludes on method complexify this picture. Here the midwife Socrates now sounds like a noble sophist in his prizing of doxastic over verbal consistency, now like a sophist in his mimicry of a «mercenary skirmisher of debate» who aims merely at verbal consistency, and now like a sophist being accused by Protagoras-*redivivus*-as-noble-sophist of conducting playful conversations heedless of truth, causing aporias by setting verbal traps for others, and making his associates hate themselves and philosophy. Socrates' ability as mental midwife to imitate performatively the stance of both sophist and noble sophist alludes to the accusations leveled at him in his trial and shows the value of intertextual interpretations of *Theaetetus* and *Apology*.[14] It is as if Socrates admits that it is hard to tell apart mental midwifery from noble or garden sophistry if method is the *sole or most important* criterion for establishing their difference. In that case, the aporias caused by the midwife's elenctic method may seem to be caused by verbal traps that the midwife sets up in order to defeat others in debate, which may then be taken to explain why those others may want to leave such a "malicious" midwife. The spiritual obstetrician's method (and concomitant effects) alone, devoid of his aim – the determination of truths from falsities – and its divine underpinnings, are insufficient to tell him apart from both noble sophist and regular sophist. Without an awareness of the midwife's divinely assisted aim of establishing and removing falsities, those

14 See GIANNOPOULOU (2013).

delivered of some nonsense or other «never believe that [Socrates] is doing this in all goodwill; they are so far from realizing that no God can wish evil to man, and that even [Socrates] doesn't do this kind of thing out of malice, but because it is not permitted to [him] to accept a lie and put away truth» (151c–d).

3 Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that an intertextual reading of noble sophistry in *Sophist* and spiritual obstetrics in *Theaetetus* allows us to see that the mental midwife, the elenctic persona that Socrates uniquely assumes in *Theaetetus* and a refashioning of his elenchus in the so-called early dialogues, differs from the noble sophist vis-à-vis his aim of distinguishing falsities from truths and the divine foundations of that aim. In terms of *technē*, method, and effects the mental midwife also differs from the noble sophist but *may* appear similar both to him and to the regular sophist, depending on the rhetorical agenda of the person describing Socrates' art and the associate's intellectual prowess. This study also confirms my retrospective and prospective reasons for a potential overlap in *Sophist* of the noble and the regular sophist. The retrospective reason – the sophist as «mischievous child» – receives *prima facie* confirmation in *Theaetetus*, when the midwife Socrates performs a sophist's verbal games, and the resurrected Protagoras, a sophist made to sound like a noble sophist, blames Socrates for conducting unserious verbal combats – i.e., behaving like a sophist. Sophists are Plato's catchall for intellectuals attempting verbally to trap their interlocutors. The prospective reason – the sophist as δοξόσοφος who possesses copies of truth – is echoed in the resurrected Protagoras' accusation of the sophist Socrates for failing to capture the meaning of his theory and for unjustly relying on what is plausible but not true. My intertextual reading continues to see the Visitor's definition of the noble sophist as *gesturing* at his prey's being a sophist under conditions that are left tantalizingly vague in *Sophist*, and allows Socrates' description of mental midwifery, supplemented by three methodological interludes, to clarify the conditions that set apart noble sophistry from spiritual obstetrics, the version of elenchus that Socrates practices in *Theaetetus*.

References

BROWN, L. (2018). Aporia in Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. In: KARAMANOLIS, G.; POLITIS, V. (eds.). *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, pp. 91–111.

CORNFORD, F.M. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. London.

DORION, L.A. (2012). Aristotle's definition of elenchus in the light of Plato's *Sophist*. In: J.L. FINK (ed.), *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, pp. 251–269.

GIANNOPOULOU, Z. (2001). 'The Sophistry of Noble Lineage' Revisited: Plato's *Sophist* 226b1–231b8. *Illinois Classical Studies*, 26, pp. 101–124.

GIANNOPOULOU, Z. (2013). *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology*. Clarendon. Oxford.

HACKFORTH, R. (1946). Moral Evil and Ignorance in Plato's Ethics. *Classical Quarterly*, 3.4, pp. 118–120.

KERFERD, G.B. (1954). Plato's Noble Art of Sophistry. *Classical Quarterly*, 48, pp. 84–90.

NARCY, M. (2007). Dialectic with and without Socrates: on the two Platonic definitions of dialectic. In: A. BOSCH-VECIANA and J. MONTSERRAT-MOLAS (eds.), *Philosophy and Dialogue: Studies on Plato's Dialogues* (vol. 1). Akademia Verlag. Sankt Augustin, pp. 193–203.

TREVASKIS, J.R. (1955). The Sophistry of Noble Lineage. *Phronesis*, 1.1, pp. 36–49.

CHAPTER 8

In What Sense Is the Philosopher Leader a «Stranger» in the City? Notes on the "Digression" in *Theaetetus* (172c2–177c5)

Beatriz Bossi

1

It seems to me that the so-called "digression" in the *Theaetetus* is not actually such a thing, in the sense that it is not incidental to the main subject, but is perfectly integrated into the dialogue's pursuit of a definition of knowledge. It offers important clues into Socrates' epistemological search for objective natures that are "objects" of contemplative knowledge. «The preeminent kind of knowledge of what is better and worse»[1] is regarded as «wisdom», which in Plato's view is inseparable from contemplative knowledge.[2] The passage functions as a rebuff to Protagoras' relativism and conventionalism, as it is defended by some of his "half followers", who think that the «sage» is the one who knows what is «useful» or «beneficial» for the city, according to a general consensus. By contrast, the philosopher is focused on the epistemological search for objective and measurable natures «from above», which imitate God's wisdom and have practical consequences that enable him to become genuinely virtuous. I acknowledge that it still holds that genuine virtues are caused by the presence of philosophical wisdom, as in the *Protagoras*, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* (after Book IV).[3]

---

1 MAHONEY (2004), p. 325. He finds that, after the contemplative moment, there is an "active" moment in which the philosopher, returning to the world, pursues the values that he has come to understand in the previous stage (p. 330). Reasonable as this is, I think that in Plato's view both moments are one and the same, while in the digression he does not make the "active" moment explicit. The intellectual visions produce «a radical reorientation of values» all of a sudden (see below, *Symposium* 212).

2 The question concerning knowledge arises out of Theodorus' praising of the wisdom and virtue of Theaetetus at 145b1–2.

3 I completely agree with POLANSKY (1992), p. 135, that the digression is reflecting upon the Socratic equation of virtue with knowledge.

Immediately before the "digression" begins, Socrates claims:

> It is in those other questions I am talking about – just and unjust, pious and impious – that men are willing to insist that no one of them has by nature any being of its own: ἐν τοῖς δικαίοις καὶ ἀδίκοις καὶ ὁσίοις καὶ ἀνοσίοις, ἐθέλουσιν ἰσχυρίζεσθαι ὡς οὐκ ἔστι φύσει αὐτῶν οὐδὲν οὐσίαν ἑαυτοῦ ἔχον; in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way, and for just as long as it so seems.[4] And even those who are not prepared to go all the way with Protagoras take some such view of wisdom.[5] But I see, Theodorus, that we are becoming involved in a greater discussion emerging from the lesser one: ἐκ λόγου μείζων ἐξ ἐλάττονος καταλαμβάνει.
>
> *Theaet.* 172b2–c1

Thus, the so-called "digression" clearly derives from a former discussion of Protagoras' views (166c9–167d5).[6] Although this passage is commonly taken as "semi-Protagorean",[7] the main function of the digression is to propose that "justice and piety" are not arbitrary conventional values but have an objective nature,[8] and, as I will suggest, are acquired as by-products of contemplative activity, in imitation of God's wisdom.[9]

4 CORNFORD (1935=1970), pp. 82–83, n. 2 observes that as the thesis that just and unjust have no objective nature but are conventionally decided by the community is attributed to Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, Socrates might be alluding to him here, rather than to Protagoras himself or to the atheists of *Laws* (889ff.) who draw the same contrast between nature and convention.

5 For a distinction between Protagorean education, entailing theoretical research and engagement with political life of the city, and sophistical (base) education focused on winning arguments, see MINTZ (2011). However, Protagoras' relativistic position cannot provide a foundation for making his students «better» (668).

6 Protagoras is refuted three times by Socrates: at 170a–d, 171a–c and 178a–179b.

7 MENN (2019), p. 69 derives the view of a "semi-Protagorean antecedent" from COOPER (1990), BARKER (1976) and BURNYEAT (1990), but he does not believe that the digression is intended as a refutation of the semi-Protagorean thesis (p. 72).

8 DORTER (1994), p. 86 claims: «it is significant that the digression begins just at the point where values are ascribed to convention rather than nature, for one of the functions of the digression is to repudiate the claim that justice and piety are arbitrary values without essence in nature»; see also SPINELLI (2002), p. 203, who refers to a «vulgar Protagoreanism typical of the ordinary citizens of Athens» and SEDLEY (2004=2011), p. 65 who comments: «The impression of its relativity arises from the narrow perspective that is enforced if one concentrates on issues of justice and injustice within the city – in the law courts, the assembly, the council».

9 For a summary of the interpretations of the "digression" throughout history, see POLANSKY (1992), p. 134, n. 87, MCPHERRAN (2010), pp. 73–74, or LARSEN (2019), pp. 3–4. While the ideal

One objection could be that as Socrates calls this section πάρεργα (177b8), he himself takes it as a digression. In my view, this is not evidence enough for it to be an incidental section, as it could simply indicate that Socrates is willing to return to the "argumentative" discussion against Protagoras, rather than allowing these Platonic/Socratic intimate religious/ethical convictions to «come on like an ever-rising flood and bury in silt their original argument»: ἀεὶ ἐπιρρέοντα καταχώσει ἡμῶν τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς λόγον (177c1–2). Once the important message is delivered, Plato's strategy is to let Socrates say he is not willing to engage in a «greater logos» that could overtake them.

It has been suggested[10] that Socrates wants to engage Protagoras' friend Theodorus in an easy and «not unpleasant» conversation, although Theodorus is somewhat reluctant as he is neither comfortable with Socrates' abstract arguments (165a1–3) nor accustomed to "Socratic dialectic" (146b3): ἐμοὶ μὲν τὰ τοιαῦτα, ὦ Σώκρατες, οὐκ ἀηδέστερα ἀκούειν: ῥᾴω γὰρ τηλικῷδε ὄντι ἐπακολουθεῖν (177c3–5). I assume that Socrates' aim is to make him realize that his role as a mathematician in search of "universal measures" does not fit with Protagoras' thesis.

Socrates' distance from the philosopher-leaders described in the section should also be addressed. Many agree that Socrates should not be identified with them, for at least two reasons. First, they are said to «ignore the way to the court», while Socrates does know the way to the court of King Archon, where he is about to face the indictment that Meletus has brought against him (210d). Second, these philosophers do not appear to directly engage in worldly political issues, while he has been active in many of the city's public places (*Apology*, 17c)[11] and has impressive knowledge of his fellow Athenians (144c).

---

of godlikeness was regarded by ancient Platonists (such as Alcinous and Plotinus) as the specific aim of Platonic philosophy, it became a matter of controversy and was at times rejected in the 19th and 20th centuries. SCHLEIERMACHER (1836=1973), p. 198, RYLE (1966), p. 158 and MCDOWELL (1973), p. 174 think it is irrelevant, while BURNYEAT (1990), p. 34 finds it does not contribute to the main inquiry. POLANSKY (1992, 135) believes that it is «vital» since it defends the divine life of the philosopher against the stunted life of the orator. Others explain it as resulting from the dramatic interplay of the characters (FRIEDLÄNDER 1960, pp. 53–56; RUE 1993; among others). SEDLEY (2004) and MCPHERRAN (2010) take the ideal philosopher as Platonic rather than Socratic. MAHONEY (2004), ARMSTRONG (2004), GIANNOPOULOU (2011) and LÄNNSTRÖM (2011) focus on the problem of the flight of the philosopher. RUE (1993) regards the ideal as ironic, but she finds the digression is to be taken seriously.

10 LARSEN (2019), p. 20.

11 SEDLEY (2011), p. 68 observes that Socrates cares for the philosophical advancement of Athenians (143d1–6), and that while his approach to the political affairs of the city was «minimalist», his midwife role focusing on «broad definitional questions» is similar to that of the philosopher-leaders. LARSEN (2019), p. 22 claims that this ideal involves

As the universal questions of (Plato's character) Socrates are akin to those of the philosopher-leaders depicted here, why should Socrates not be identified with them? Why does Plato want us to regard him (and Theodorus) as only belonging to «the chorus of philosophers»?

We should note that there are two Socrates here: Plato's character Socrates who is on his way to the Porch, and the historical Socrates who was put to death and whose ghost hangs over the whole dialogue. The sarcastic and provocative caricature that the character Socrates presents, of the «small sharp legal minds», likely refers to his poisoned environment and to those who make fun of philosopher-leaders in Athens, including Plato and his Academy.

Additionally, we should address why the philosopher-leaders seem to be indifferent to the political arena.[12] They have certain features in common with the philosopher-kings of the *Republic*: none will ever participate in ignoble or slavish politics as they are free from political corruption, and they regard contemplation as a higher and happier activity than politics. However, although in the *Republic* the philosopher-kings must necessarily descend to govern the "ideal" city, here we have no indication of such a commitment. If philosopher-leaders cannot possibly rule "corrupted" cities, perhaps this is a signal of Plato's own frustration in Syracuse.[13] There are, however, I suggest, clear indications that the 'chorus' of the philosophers (in the drama, Socrates and Theodorus; in real life, Plato's disciples?) do have a role to play in the city, for they at least *must tell the truth* to their fellow citizens.

2

Socrates introduces his speech by comparing those who have spent «a great part of their lives in philosophical studies»: οἱ ἐν ταῖς φιλοσοφίαις πολὺν χρόνον διατρίψαντες (172c4–5) and have been «brought up in philosophy and similar

selecting some Socratic features while dismissing others: he engages in conversation rather than solitary investigation and he is a good patriot. As Socrates' philosophy can be understood as a "service to the god", as he attempts to make the city more virtuous and happier (*Apology* 30a2–b2; 36c2–8; 36d9–e1) and to induce people to take care of their souls (29e1–3), I agree with LARSEN (2019), pp. 25–26 that the digression «expresses a basic Platonic-Socratic teaching».

12 LARSEN (2019), p. 14, p. 18 observes that the philosopher is not indifferent to his fellow citizens as human beings but to political power, institutions, reputation, wealth and ancestors. And he does not become involved in pursuing political affairs by «slandering opponents and dragging them to court».

13 TAYLOR (1934), p. 336 agrees with BURNET (1914), pp. 244–5 that the digression is «an expression of the mood» in which Plato contemplated «the mundane life of the Syracusan court» and the pettiness of the personalities he would have met.

studies»: τοὺς ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ καὶ τῇ τοιᾷδε διατριβῇ (172c9–d1) with those who «have been knocking about in law courts since they were boys». The former appear as «ridiculous» speakers in the courts of law, while he regards the latter as «slaves in breeding» compared to freemen that enjoy leisure. As Plato usually refers to "study" with the term διατριβῇ, we can assume that Socrates alludes either to Plato's students in the Academy, or to those who are supposed to spend long years devoting themselves to such matters. Socrates finds that Theodorus and himself follow a procedure similar to theirs:

> Just as we are now taking up argument after argument, already beginning a third, so can they if, as in our case, the new one satisfies them better than that in which they are engaged; and they do not care at all whether their talk is long or short if only they hit upon that which is: ἂν μόνον τύχωσι τοῦ ὄντος.
>
> *Theaet.* 172d5–9

The passage is quite revealing. Socrates and Theodorus are "like" the ones who spend their lives devoted to philosophy and similar matters, and more importantly, the so-called "digression" is in fact a "third" argument, which must be somehow related to the central topic, since they find it "preferable" to those they previously developed. As Protagoras' friend, Theodorus is not willing to oppose him and feels reluctant to argue against his views. Socrates compares Theodorus to those freemen who search for the truth, and introduces an «easier more pleasant» subject, to engage him in conversation and place him on "his" side. Theodorus is likely not to realize that his task as a mathematician and astronomer who searches for "universal" truths cannot be reconciled with Protagoras' *dictum*, although Socrates had told him so at 169a1–5. He indirectly returns to this point here: mathematicians and astronomers «hit upon that which is», like philosophers.

Socrates also makes a detailed speech about the moral decay of slavish and worldly orators:

> The discourses are always about a fellow-slave, and are addressed to a master, who sits there holding some case or other in his hands; and the contests never run an indefinite course, but are always directed to the point at issue, and often the race is a matter of life and death.
>
> *Theaet.* 172e4–173a1

In a sense, the "digression" could be viewed as an open attack on corrupt orators who are skilled in flattering their master to gain his favour, while their souls become 'small and deviant' (σμικροὶ δὲ καὶ οὐκ ὀρθοὶ τὰς ψυχάς: 173a3)

as they have been prevented from developing freely and properly. The slavery they have endured from their youth onwards, Socrates claims, forces them into doing crooked things (ἀναγκάζουσα πράττειν σκολιά) by imposing a great burden of danger and fear on their souls while they are still tender. As they cannot bear this burden with justice and truth, they turn to deceit and avenging wrong with wrong, so that they become greatly crooked and eventually grow into manhood with a mind that is not healthy, while they think they have become clever and wise: δεινοί τε καὶ σοφοὶ (173a5–b2).

3

Next, Socrates focuses on «the leaders of the chorus» (περὶ τῶν κορυφαίων: 173c7–8). «Why», he wonders, «should anyone talk about those who spend time in philosophy in a poor/ordinary way?» (τί γὰρ ἄν τις τούς γε φαύλως διατρίβοντας ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ λέγοι; 173c8–9). The adverb φαύλως could be translated as «badly» or «poorly» but also as «ordinarily» or «commonly». Fowler (1921) translates the phrase as «inferior philosophers» and Levett (1997) suggests «second-rate specimens». In any case, Socrates' passing question may explain why he is not going to talk about himself or about Theodorus, but about those who "lead" the chorus of philosophers. Although both of them are said to «belong to the same chorus» (τοὺς δὲ τοῦ ἡμετέρου χοροῦ: 173b3–6) Socrates' assumption about not regarding themselves as "first-rate" philosophers fits perfectly well with his typical disavowal of knowledge, and with Plato's conviction that it is a mark of those who are really "wise" to never regard themselves as such.

In my view, the paradox is that Plato, although he regards the historical Socrates as a wise man whose mission in life is the service of the God, and whose universal research fits the profile precisely because he takes his master to be genuinely wise, would never allow *his character* to regard himself so, and thus his Socrates could not possibly include himself in the class of the first-rate philosopher-leaders, as he would always regard his knowledge as minimal compared to God's.[14]

Therefore, the description that follows does not refer to "ordinary" philosophers, but to high level masters that are thought to be in a position to "lead

14 Giannopoulou (2011) claims that Socrates' godlikeness is of an inferior non-philosophical species of the genus, because his epistemic barrenness prevents him from defining the virtues that constitute godlikeness. But Socrates is not just «eager» to become a member of the «chorus of the philosophers» as Giannopoulou claims (p. 138). As he includes himself in the class (173b3–6), his godlikeness must be philosophical, for being endowed with eros for universal knowledge, he «strives» for it.

other philosophers". One may wonder who Socrates is referring to and whether Plato, who is the director of a school of philosophers, is not simply proposing himself[15] by building an "ideal profile" that serves as a kind of provocative advertisement model for his enemies in the city, and also as a way of attracting the best students to his own school.[16] As these philosopher-leaders do not strive for public office or dream of indulging «in banquets» with «chorus girls», they could be compared to the philosophers in the *Republic*. However, no one in Athens could grow up without knowing the way to the public places in the city, not to mention the absolute ignorance about «laws and decrees» (173c9–d4), or about high or low births, and as they do not even suspect that they are ignorant about these things (173d9–e1), it is obvious that we cannot take this exaggeration *au pied de la lettre* but should regard it as metaphorical. No-one living in the city, and much less Plato himself, could completely ignore these facts.[17]

The explanation of these exaggerated idiosyncrasies is as follows:

> [The philosopher] keeps aloof from [affairs of the city] not for the sake of good reputation but in reality only his body has its place and dwells in the city; his thought, considering all these petty and of no account, disdaining them in every way, flies according to Pindar "below the earth" and doing geometry (γεωμετροῦσα) on the surfaces, and "above the heaven" doing astronomy, investigating in every way all the nature of the things which are, each as a whole (πᾶσαν πάντῃ φύσιν ἐρευνωμένη τῶν ὄντων ἑκάστου ὅλου) but stooping to consider none of the things nearby (εἰς τῶν ἐγγὺς).
>
> *Theaet*. 173e2–174a2, trans. POLANSKY 1992, p. 138

Thus, the realm of the philosopher is scientific universal nature as a whole (a typical description of Platonic dialectic), which appears to include mathematics (geometry) and what we call "physics"[18] (astronomy), i.e., Theodorus'

15 SPINELLI (2002), p. 205 finds «un'implicita allusione alla posizione di "caposcuola" dello stesso Platone».

16 See MAHONEY (2004), pp. 326–7.

17 I agree with POLANSKY (1992, 137–8) that the thrust of these «shocking statements» is that «philosophers are not preoccupied with what principally concerns other people», and that is why they rarely grasp the existence of things such as political clubs, feasts, flute-girls, or the ancestors of fellow-citizens. They depend on the city to nourish and protect them, and to provide education and companionship, but the philosopher-leader's «scientific perspective cannot be that of his own city». For the usual accusations, Polansky refers to *Republic* 487ff. and *Apology* 19b and 23a.

18 While in the *Apology* (18b; 19 b-d) Socrates denies knowing anything about nature, in the *Phaedo* (96a6–7) he says that in his youth he was interested in it, and that he is still so «in

fields.[19] However, the claim about the mind's flight never stooping to consider things nearby is so strange that even Theodorus asks Socrates what he means by it. Socrates refers to the anecdote about Thales and the Thracian servant to account for the philosopher's "typical" distraction from what is in front of him, due to his universal interests (174a). Thus, the absent-minded philosopher looks funny to the many. He fails to see his next-door neighbour because he is investigating «what a human being is and what is proper for such a nature to do or bear, different from any other»: τί δέ ποτ᾽ ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος καὶ τί τῇ τοιαύτῃ φύσει προσήκει διάφορον τῶν ἄλλων ποιεῖν ἢ πάσχειν (174b4–5).[20] Socrates adds that when «he is obliged to speak in court» about the things before his eyes, he looks very comic because he falls into all sort of perplexities through inexperience (174c5); his clumsiness makes him seem a fool, and when gossip is the topic of conversation, he never has anything of his own to contribute, because he knows no evil in any man (174c–d). It seems that the philosopher's high intellectual skills prevent him from developing other ordinary skills, such as a sense of orientation and social attitudes, which are essential for leading a life in the city, as the *Philebus* (62b) indicates, where «knowing the way home» is to be included in «the recipe for human happiness». Therefore, one is tempted to suggest that Plato is deliberately provoking Socrates' prosecutors, his own adversaries in Athens and/or the semi-Protagoreans' worldly mentality.[21] If the conventional concept of justice consists in «helping friends and harming

---

the nature of all the things that are» (100b5–7; 103c10–e7). According to MENN (2019), p. 114 Plato «wants to appeal to the broadest consensus of physicists and mathematicians and dialecticians, of anyone who agrees that man is not the measure of all things» but that there are objective measures to calculate being. According to RUE (1993), p. 87 Socrates is alluding to the caricature of the philosopher that Aristophanes makes in the *Clouds* (188–203) because she assumes, wrongly, that he is criticizing the philosopher.

19 The subjects Theodorus cultivates, namely, music, calculation, geometry, astronomy and harmony (145a5–7; d1) correspond to the first part of the philosopher's curriculum at *Republic* 525a–530d. On the relation between the practice of measuring and its implications for the philosopher's life, see MENN (2019), p. 94 ff.

20 Dialectic seems to be implied in the discrimination of differences, and also at 175c2–3: see LARSEN (2019), p. 20.

21 TAYLOR (1934), p. 336 rejects the idea that Plato is polemicizing against Isocrates and concludes that the legal slave must be an admirer of Antiphon or Thrasymacus. SPINELLI (2002), p. 214, n.42 summarizes some assumptions on this point; BOSTOCK (1988), p. 98 believes that Socrates alludes to Antiphon (or Thrasymachus, as Cornford does, *ad loc.*) while H. NIEHUES-PRÖBSTING (1982) goes back to the idea that Socrates alludes to Isocrates; A. CAPELLE (1961), p. 192 defends the view that Socrates is alluding to professional statesmen such as Callicles, Meletus, Anitus or Critias. MENN (2019), p. 100 points to Callicles and Isocrates.

enemies», the Platonic philosopher, due to his inexperience, will appear equally unable.[22]

The philosopher-leader seems ridiculous to the many and, as he genuinely laughs at self-laudation, he is thought to be a fool. Conversely, he regards tyrants and kings as uncultivated, as they must rear «difficult, treacherous» herds, lack leisure and live in a kind of «prison». The wealthy seem poor to him when compared to his extended realm of study, and those who feel proud of their noble birth appear vain and ignorant, because they are unable to «calculate that every single man has countless ancestors of every kind: rich men and beggars, kings and slaves, Greeks and foreigners by the thousand» (174d–175b). The philosopher is taken as an arrogant person: ὑπερηφάνως ἔχων (175b5), while he in turn views the many as vain and ignorant. But the passage's importance lies in the suggestion that philosophers are not ridiculous or vain, as they can offer reasons to support their views.

However, Socrates adds that when the philosopher-leader manages to draw some willing person to investigate justice and royalty, and happiness and misery in general (ὅλως), and to how they can gain happiness and escape misery (175c5–8), the situation is reversed: «the small sharp legal mind», which is disconcerted at the new experience of hanging at such a height, does not know what to say, and becomes ridiculous in the eyes of free men (175c8–d8).

The ascent to knowledge is a common feature in the *Symposium*, the *Republic*[23] and the *Phaedrus*. In our passage, the difference is that the object of contemplation at the summit is not "self-subsistent forms" but simply things taken ὅλως. Thus, the "digression" emerges as containing precisely the same as the contents of the "epistemological" investigation, i.e., universal "natures", which do not depend either on Protagorean individual views or on a semi-Protagorean "wise" consensus about the useful or the just, although Protagoras might inconsistently expect his relativity thesis to be accepted as a general truth.[24] Socrates is doubtless urging that only a proper investigation of those genuine universal natures can enlighten action.[25]

22 A hypothesis I suggest based on Polansky's observation about conventional justice (POLANSKY 1992, p. 139).

23 For a parallel with the simile of the cave, see CORNFORD (1935), p. 89.

24 Plato's Protagoras never says that his thesis is just true *for him* but refers to it as «the Truth» without qualifications (166c–d). If this were so, it would make his doctrine inconsistent, as it would be an exception to his *homo mensura* thesis. In the absence of something better than *doxa* itself, TRABATTONI (2020), pp. 89–106 claims that "quantitative" considerations are all we have, but these considerations confirm that everyone (but Protagoras and his followers) thinks that he is wrong.

25 See POLANSKY (1992), p. 140.

4

The comparison between "the philosopher" and the "slavish" man becomes more comic. A philosopher is a man to whom appearing simple and good-for-nothing when confronted with menial tasks is no disgrace, including making a bed, sweetening a sauce or composing a flattering speech. On the contrary, the man who excels at doing these tasks «does not know how to wear his cloak as a freeman should», (i.e., properly draped), and «still less to acquire the true harmony of speech and hymn aright the praises of the true life of gods and blessed men» (175e1–176a1; see also *Republic* 607a3–5 about right hymns).

According to Aristophanes (*Birds*, 1567ff.), the Athenians regarded the proper draping of the cloak as a sign of good breeding. The well-bred Athenian first threw his cloak over the left shoulder, then passed it round the back to the right side, then either above or below the right arm, and finally over the left arm or shoulder. In addition, some sources refer to the importance of wearing a cloak as a signal of belonging to Plato's Academy.[26] In any case, Plato's commentary contains what we can view as "class-prejudices" against certain "slavish" tasks. Although the philosopher's life implies not only the freedom and leisure to conduct his intellectual research, but also good breeding related to "elegant" habits and poetical skills, the important issue is in fact the contrast between the flattering of slaves and the praising of what is superior, namely the life of gods and blessed men on behalf of the philosophers.

Sophist 216c2–d2 provides three features of the philosophers that are presented here: they «*visit* the cities» (like the gods), which is parallel to «only his body lives in the city»; they behold from *above* the life of those below, which is parallel to «his mind dwells in heights»; and the ignorant judge them as being of *no worth*, which is parallel to the view that they are taken as «ridiculous distracted good-for-nothing characters» by the many. However, the most important features are yet to come.

5

Theodorus is persuaded that if everyone were convinced about what Socrates says, peace would prevail (176a3–4). However, persuasion is not that powerful. Socrates claims that it is impossible to destroy evils and that they do not

26 SPINELLI (2002), p. 210, n. 28 mentions Dicearcus (fr. 44 Wehrli.= Diog. Laert. III. 46) and Philodemus (*Academicorum Index*, col. VI 20 ff.) See also DORANDI (1989).

settle among the gods, but dwell from necessity in the mortal nature (176a5–8). He adds:

> (…) we ought to try to escape from earth to heaven as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and pious with wisdom: διὸ καὶ πειρᾶσθαι χρὴ ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε φεύγειν ὅτι τάχιστα. φυγὴ δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ[27] κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν· ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι.[28]
>
> *Theaet.* 176a8–b2

We know from the *Republic* (613a7–b1) that «the gods never neglect anyone who eagerly wishes to become just and who makes himself as much like a God as a human can, by adopting a virtuous way of life». However, the significance of our passage lies in the interpretation of the escape. The philosopher does not escape from the city because he wants to reject his commitments within it, as one would imagine, but because he wants to escape from evils and become like God, through becoming righteous and pious with wisdom.

In my view, it is not the case that these three virtues stand on the same level,[29] but that the emphasis is placed on the role that wisdom plays. At the end of the *Protagoras*, Socrates appears to defend the view that virtue is essentially one, and that the different "virtues" we distinguish are simply wisdom: ὡς πάντα χρήματά ἐστιν ἐπιστήμη, καὶ ἡ δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ ἡ ἀνδρεία (361b1–2), for virtue is wisdom as a whole: ἐπιστήμη ὅλον (361b6). I translate ἐπιστήμη as 'wisdom' because Plato does not distinguish ἐπιστήμη from φρόνησις or σοφία (as Aristotle does), but uses the three terms interchangeably (see *Prot.* 352a–c). In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates uses φρόνησις (at 176b2) and σοφία and γνῶσις (at 176c4) apparently as equivalent in meaning, and he also does this at the beginning of the dialogue, when he asks: ταὐτὸν ἄρα ἐπιστήμη καὶ σοφία; (145e6–7).[30]

---

27 For other passages about assimilation to God in Plato, see *Phaedrus* 246d, 248a, 249c; *Phaedo* 78b–84b; *Republic* 613a–b; *Philebus* 28c–30e; *Timaeus* 47c; 89e–90d and *Laws* 716b–d.

28 SEDLEY (2011), p. 74, n. 32 reports that Levett replaced «pious» with «pure» and Cornford left it out altogether.

29 SEDLEY (2011), p. 75, n.35 rightly observes that Fowler and others «misleadingly treat this phrase as merely adding wisdom to the list of virtues thus acquired», while CAMPBELL (1861) recognizes the full significance of the expression. Sedley understands that wisdom is introduced here because it is «the only underivatively good» (cf. *Meno* 87e5–89a5; *Euthydemus* 278e3–282e5; *Phaedo*, 68c5–69e4 and *Republic* 591b5–7; 621c5–6; 619c6–d1).

30 In my view, this Platonic ambiguity might have inspired Aristotle's attribution of "intellectualism" to the Socrates of the *Protagoras*. The paradox is that Aristotle's definition of

In my view, the pivotal issue in the discussion between Protagoras and Socrates is that when they talk about "virtue" they mean different things. Plato appears to combine Socrates' and Protagoras' theses in the *Republic*, in the sense that wisdom (or philosophical virtue) remains superior and is not something to be taught, while popular virtue, which involves habit and discipline, can be taught by the city. Thus, Plato eventually clarifies himself and embraces both of his characters. Demotic virtues fall short of genuine goodness when not guided by wisdom (see *Phaedo* 82a11–b3; *Republic* 500d6–8 and *Laws* 968a1–4).[31]

Socrates' thesis in the *Protagoras* could be interpreted in the sense that every virtue implies some knowledge of what the correct action is. The virtues we typically distinguish are suggested to be simply different names for the same "gold", if wisdom is present in the subject. Every genuine virtuous action depends on a certain "calculus" that wisdom performs. Courage consists in "the knowledge" of what is and is not to be feared; moderation in "the knowledge" of the degree of pleasure to be taken; piety in "the knowledge" of the divine and how one can strive for it; and justice, in knowing who is who and, accordingly, in knowing what kind of education (and function) men should be assigned. However, wisdom should not be regarded as "mere" knowledge: it is powerful enough to command the correct action, but if the agent lacks wisdom, passion can drag him around like a slave.

φρόνησις is suspiciously close to Socrates' description of his ἐπιστήμη/σοφία/φρόνησις in the *Protagoras* inasmuch as it gives commands (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1143a8–9) and, as it is not related to proof but to experience and age, being «like an eye to see correctly» (1143b11–14), it does not appear that it can be taught through habit and discipline. What Socrates means by "virtue" (i.e., what Plato called ἐπιστήμη/σοφία/φρόνησις and Aristotle called φρόνησις) is wisdom, and when present (Aristotle agrees), it is powerful enough to master a person and cannot be taught.

31 Aristotle also distinguishes "performing just acts" from "being just", in the sense that one can do the right thing, but not for the sake of the good itself. This distinction is similar to Plato's between demotic and philosophical virtue. Analogously, Aristotle assumes that ethical virtues are taken to the level of genuine virtues only if the agent is not deprived of φρόνησις (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b18–21). Aristotle appears to assume that Socrates ignores the fact that what he calls 'ethical' virtue depends on habit and can be taught through discipline. However, if the Socratic interpretation of Simonides' lines: πράξας μὲν γὰρ εὖ πᾶς ἀνὴρ ἀγαθός, κακὸς δ' εἰ κακῶς (*Fr*. 37.1.17=*Prot*. 344e7–8) means that it is by doing the right thing that a man becomes good (and bad, by doing the wrong), according to the examples he gives next (345a1–4) of the expert in letters and the physician that become good 'through a good praxis' (ἀγαθὴ πρᾶξίς: 345a1) he cannot ignore that what Protagoras (and Aristotle) call "virtue" depends on habit and can be taught, at least up to a point.

In light of this interpretation, I am inclined to keep Fowler's translation of δίκαιον as «righteous» rather than «just». Plato's selection of justice and piety is not surprising because these are precisely the virtues he mentions just before the digression starts (172b3–4). The meaning of the whole phrase ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι (at 176b2) would in my view be better understood if wisdom is taken to be the cause of *every right action*, considering the fact that someone becomes genuinely pious when wisdom makes him understand that piety is not essentially a question of rituals and festivals (no matter how educational they might be for Socrates or Plato in the city) but of becoming divine. This interpretation fits with Plato's thesis in the *Phaedo* (69b3–4) that all the "genuine" virtues are gained μετὰ φρονήσεως. The expression in *Republic* 519b5: σωφροσύνην τε καὶ δικαιοσύνην μετὰ φρονήσεως again appears to emphasize the role of wisdom, and our passage is also comparable to *Symposium* 212a2–7, where Socrates reveals similar relationships between intellectual ascent, truth, genuine virtue and the divine. Only after the vision of Beauty itself are genuine virtues begotten and one is able to become a friend of the gods and "immortal", insofar as a human can.

This interpretation therefore suggests that it cannot be that the philosopher does not fulfil his civil duty, because as he is wise he must be completely virtuous, which implies that he cannot simply ignore his commitments to his fellow citizens or commit any type of injustice.[32] However, his idea of "civil duty" is not typical. His very specific role in the city is to educate and lead other philosophers so that as a "chorus" they will be ready to "tell the truth" to those who are not willing to hear it, as is the case in tragedy:

> Indeed, my good friend, it is not at all easy to persuade people that the reason generally advanced for the pursuit of virtue and the avoidance of vice – namely, in order that a man may not *seem* bad and may *seem* good – is not the reason why the one should be practiced and the other not; that, I think, is merely old wives' chatter, as the saying is. *Let us give the true reason*. In God there is no sort of wrong whatsoever, but he is utterly and perfectly righteous, and there is nothing so like him as that

32 I cannot agree with Rue's thesis (RUE 1993, p. 74) thesis that «philosophers are useless and incompetent in all practical matters», and «as one-sided and incomplete as the orator» (p. 75). Orators are «wise» only in the Protagorean sense because they do not know or care about what is "really" good. She wonders why Socrates counsels flight from evil instead of fighting against it (86) for she does not seem to appreciate the Platonic educational moral import of 'star-gazing' (and scientific research). As she concludes that Socrates is the best available measure between orators and philosophers (100), she seems to ignore the fact that Socrates regards himself as a member of the chorus of philosophers.

> one of us who in turn becomes most nearly perfect in righteousness. And it is here that we see whether a man is truly clever or truly weakling and a nonentity; for the recognition of this is wisdom or true virtue, while ignorance is folly and manifest wickedness: ἡ μὲν γὰρ τούτου γνῶσις σοφία καὶ ἀρετὴ ἀληθινή, ἡ δὲ ἄγνοια ἀμαθία καὶ κακία ἐναργής.
>
> *Theaet.* 176b2–c5

Here again Socrates distinguishes between apparent and true virtue, as he did in his discussion with Polus in the *Gorgias*. Fowler translates the καὶ between σοφία and ἀρετὴ ἀληθινή as «or» but it could also be «and». If «or», Plato's thesis in the *Protagoras* would still hold, but even if there is a distinction between wisdom and true virtue we should assume that wisdom remains the "source" of true virtue, as suggested in the *Symposium*. I regard Plato as adhering to his thesis about the intimate relation between wisdom and the rest of the virtues, but he happens to have attenuated his perspective. He replaces his previous identification of all the virtues with wisdom in the *Protagoras* with a "new formula" in the *Phaedo*, where real or philosophical virtue is described as μετὰ φρονήσεως (69b3–4; see the context: 69a6–c3). This is exactly the same formula he uses here (176b2) and in the *Republic* (519b5).

One curious point is that Aristotle, who criticizes Socrates for thinking that all the virtues are just forms of ἐπιστήμη, uses the Platonic formula μετὰ φρονήσεως to "correct" all those who describe virtue merely as κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον (which, in his view, is equivalent to κατὰ τὴν φρόνησιν), and attributes the formula to himself: δεῖ δὲ μικρὸν μεταβῆναι. ἔστι γὰρ οὐ μόνον ἡ κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον, ἀλλ᾽ ἡ μετὰ τοῦ ὀρθοῦ λόγου ἕξις ἀρετή ἐστιν: ὀρθὸς δὲ λόγος περὶ τῶν τοιούτων ἡ φρόνησίς ἐστιν. Σωκράτης μὲν οὖν λόγους τὰς ἀρετὰς ᾤετο εἶναι (ἐπιστήμας γὰρ εἶναι πάσας), ἡμεῖς δὲ μετὰ λόγου (*Nich. Eth.* 1144b21–32).

Aristotle thus in a sense appears to be indifferent to the dramatic approach that is woven into the *Protagoras*, in which the polemic discussion only works if Socrates and Protagoras defend partial views and retain the semantic disagreement about what each one calls "virtue". That the final "logos" found both characters ridiculous perhaps means that Plato was aware of the fact (see notes 30 and 31 above).

Coming back to the *Theaetetus*, everything depends on a very specific γνῶσις: the recognition of God's righteousness. The thesis that 'only God is good' is given through the quotation of Simonides' *Poem* (*Protagoras*, 341e3) and that ignorance is ἀμαθία (folly, stupidity or incapacity to learn) or/and κακία ἐναργής (manifest wickedness or vice) echoes early Platonic doctrine, but it still holds here. The emphasis on γνῶσις, σοφία and φρόνησις is sufficient evidence that the so-called 'digression' is intimately connected to the subject matter of

the dialogue as a whole, namely ἐπιστήμη (which Socrates identifies with σοφία in the context of 145e6–7). In this section, however, the theme is related to the lifestyle of the philosopher-leader, whose universal and lofty interests are linked to divine wisdom, which is to be regarded as the source of righteousness and genuine holiness.[33]

I agree with Sedley[34] that becoming fully «just and pious» starts with the philosopher's detachment from the civic environment «in which demotic justice and its fraudulent imitations are located», and from the cults and festivals in which the gods are «shamefully misrepresented».[35] He would, however, compose hymns to the gods and to «blessed men».

In my view, "moral" justice or piety does not need to be attributed to the gods so individuals can imitate them, for the imitation is mediated by wisdom. The relation between wisdom and righteousness comes from the intellectual understanding of the orderly relation between wholes and parts (be it in nature, mathematics, or dialectic) that permeates reality, and is to be attributed to God (as the Intellect that causes Limit and Measure, if we consider the *Philebus*). Admiring this beautiful order produces an immediate desire to be a part of it, by imitating its regularity and harmony in one's soul. I agree that "just and pious" should be assumed to be a redundancy referring to generic righteousness,[36] due to the causal role of wisdom. However, my understanding is that the intellectual activity performed with wisdom also produces the highest version of piety, beyond any externalization through cults and festivals, which consists of a sheer admiration of the Divine Wisdom's ability to produce order, and the desire to become like him. This specific philosopher-leader is righteous (and pious) in the sense of striving to become as wise as God, as far as that is possible for humans.

The unrighteous and impious man, according to Socrates, grants that he is clever as he employs knavery to live safely in the city (he glories in such a reproach). The best approach to him is to tell him the truth: just because he

---

33 I agree with MENN (2019), p. 90 who comments that «becoming just and pious out of mere conformity to civic custom does not assimilate you to the gods, but the philosophers' *phronēsis*, unlike the semi-Protagorean orators' cleverness, does lead to these virtues».

34 SEDLEY (2011), p. 83. For a criticism of this view about popular cult and festivals see MCPHERRAN (2010), who appeals to the *Republic* and the *Laws* to show that Plato relies on them as a strong educational resource.

35 For a parallel significant passage about the philosopher's detachment in the *Republic* see 5008b8-d. MENN (2019), p. 114 concludes that «we can gain salvation from evils (…) only by escaping from them, and we can do this (…) only by contemplation, assimilating ourselves to the gods, not in their power over the world, but in their perspective from above it, which gives them freedom from its follies».

36 MCPHERRAN (2010), p. 86.

does not think he is such as he really is, he is so all the more truly. Such men do not realize that the penalty for unrighteousness is not mere punishment and death as they think, which they are used to escaping from, «but a penalty that is impossible to escape» (176d5–e1).

Socrates affirms that «there are two paradigms/patterns set up in reality, one divine and supremely happy while the other, having nothing of God in it, is the pattern of deepest unhappiness»: παραδειγμάτων (…) ἐν τῷ ὄντι ἑστώτων, τοῦ μὲν θείου εὐδαιμονεστάτου, τοῦ δὲ ἀθέου ἀθλιωτάτου (176e3–4). Being blinded by folly and lack of understanding, the unrighteous fail to perceive that «the effect of their unjust practices is to make them more and more like the former and less and less like the latter; for this, they pay the penalty of living the life that corresponds to the pattern they resemble» (177a1–3). When told that if they do not get rid of this "ability" they will not be accepted after death in the divine pure place that is free from every evil but will forever continue living a life in this world after their own likeness, they will think «this is the way mindless fools talk to a clever knave like me» (177a3–8).

Socrates insists that they should «tell the truth» to those people because the important goal is not just remaining «safe» in the city, but striving for «the divine happiest pattern», no matter how mistakenly their message will be received by the «clever» unjust orators. We can note that «both heaven and hell are the company you keep», while «the afterlife is a mere continuation of that choice between the divine and the godless realms».[37] This brief reference to the divine pattern and the afterlife breaks into a political discussion and is located at the exact centre of the dialogue, as in the central books of the *Republic* where the contrast between the corporeal and the intelligible realms is introduced.[38]

The "digression" is evidently addressed directly in opposition to the Protagorean circles, as Socrates' discussion refers to what there is "in reality" to be learnt, no matter what the individual approach is. Of course, Protagoras would expect his own thesis to be taken as the "real" interpretation of human knowledge, but Plato would certainly take God to be «the measure of all things» (*Laws* 716c1–d3), as God is the Intellect of the Cosmos and thus the principle of measure and limit.[39]

37 SEDLEY (2011), p. 80.

38 On this point, see POLANSKY (1992, 141, n. 95) and particularly DORTER (1994, p. 87; p. 88). See also SPINELLI (2002), p. 209 and SEDLEY (2011), p. 80, n. 43.

39 ARMSTRONG (2004), p. 181 offers an interpretation of Plato's late theology to "correct" Plato's reputation of an "escapist" which he attributes the ancient commentators.

6

In my view, one key to the deeper meaning of the "digression" lies in the understanding that, unlike Aristotle's, Socratic/Platonic φρόνησις is both theoretical and practical. «Theoretical models may have critical practical implications (...) Recognition that god is perfect and forms the measure for man is the illumination of the human situation that can guide our reflective and active life».[40]

I finally conclude that, although at first reading some of the commentaries of Socrates about the extravagant "escape" attitudes the ideal philosopher-leaders are said to adopt in the city, and also those against Plato's class-prejudices, may appear shocking, Socrates' speech eventually confirms that the philosopher, rather than being a stranger, plays an essential role in the city. Free from human masters (and the corresponding worldly anxiety), he is not preoccupied with the concerns of the majority, but is ready to tell the uncomfortable truth to those who, lacking real knowledge, feel proud of their success and remain "safe", due to their complete adaptation to the mediocre patterns of the city.[41] Philosopher-leaders are brave enough not to care about being regarded as distracted and "moribund"[42] fools, or even worse, as men sentenced to death.

In my view, the digression does not need to be interpreted as an invitation to flee from earth, but only from *evil* on earth, by becoming increasingly similar to what is "the" absolute *goodness*, through wisdom. Becoming a better person means nothing less than becoming like God through a gradual mimetic process, so the philosopher must remain distant from tricky strategies aimed at attaining power or wealth, from self-deceit and vanity, and from gossip and apparent virtue. Dwelling in intellectual peaceful heights should not be taken

---

40 POLANSKY (1992), p. 145. The author explains: «the engagement in theoretical activity can convince people that the common enthusiasm for wealth, honor, noble birth, and so on, is misplaced in such insubstantial things», for «clarity of vision of our true end will help order our souls and improve our lives (...). Because the "recognition" that is called true wisdom and virtue involves both insight that the cosmic principles are perfect and appreciation that human beings (...) may model themselves on these principles, it implies theoretical sophistication as well as practical concern. It is appropriate to call this recognition *phronesis*, because it constitutes true human wisdom and virtue» (pp. 143–44).

41 I agree with SEDLEY (2011), p. 76 that «in the light of this significant use of "with wisdom" we can work out the full contrast intended by Socrates» here: civil justice perpetrated by judicial manipulators, enacted in local laws, «strongly coloured by local *relativities*» (...) «whose function is to instil appropriate habits and appearances, not understanding». By standing back from that, the philosopher acquires the wisdom that both gives him «an understanding of justice as an *absolute* value» and makes him «an *authentically* just person». True righteousness is to be found only after the intellectual ascent. (Italics are mine).

42 See *Phaedo* 64 a4–6; 64a10–b6.

as indifference to the city as a whole, for the philosopher, once he attains objective knowledge (be it in mathematics, physics or dialectic, through measuring natures in their wholes and parts), imitates God's wisdom as far as humanly capable. He will be in the position to become a better person, and as he will come to know what genuine human happiness is and how it can be obtained, he will have much to teach to the few who are ready to listen.[43]

References

ARMSTRONG, J.M. (2004). After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming Like God. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 26, pp. 171–183.

BARKER, A. (1976). The Digression in the *Theaetetus*. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 14, pp. 457–62.

BOSTOCK, D. (1988). *Plato's* Theaetetus. OUP. Oxford.

BURNYEAT, M.F. (1990). "Introduction". In: LEVETT, J., BURNYEAT, M. (eds.), *Theaetetus*. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

CAPELLE, A. (1961). Protagoreer oder Politiker? Plato, *Theaetet*. 172B–177C. *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, N.F. 104.

COOPER, J.M. (1990). *Plato's Theaetetus*. Garland Publishing. New York-London.

COOPER, J.M. (2012). *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy, from Socrates to Plotinus*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.

CORNFORD, F.M. (1935=1970). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.

DORANDI, T. (1989). Assiotea e Lastenia: due donne all'Accademia, *Atti e Memorie Accademia Toscana 'La Colombaria'*, 54, 53–66.

DORTER, K. (1994). *Form and Good in Plato's Eleatic Dialogues, The Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist and Statesman*, University of California Press. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London.

FRIEDLÄNDER, P. (1960). *Platon – Band III: Die Platonischen Schriften, zweite und dritte Periode*. Zweite erweiterte und verbesserte Auflage, Walter deGruyter & Co. Berlin.

43 MINTZ (2011), p. 666 comments that Socrates presents the life of the philosopher as wholly «undesirable» to the majority of young men, for a pedagogical purpose: «It is only if one wants to work incredibly hard, for no financial reward and no public adoration, that one should embark on an education in search of the fruits of philosophy». However, it is worth noticing that Socrates also presents the philosophical life as the highest and happiest, the one that makes men become similar to the divine, for when they fall in love with truth and wisdom they are in the position to gain its by-product, excellence. The principal audience are the young men listening, and they «must be protected» from the appeal of the orators' life: POLANSKY (1992), p. 135.

GIANNOPOULOU, Z. (2011). Socrates and Godlikeness in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 36, pp. 135–148.

LÄNNSTRÖM, A. (2011). Socrates, the Philosopher in the *Theaetetus*' Digression (172c–177c) and the Ideal of *homoiôsis theôi*. *Apeiron*, 44, pp. 111–130.

LARSEN, J.K. (2019). Measuring Humans against Gods: on the Digression of Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 101 (1), pp. 1–29.

MAHONEY, T. (2004). Is Assimilation to God in the *Theaetetus* Purely Otherworldly?. *Ancient Philosophy*, 24, pp. 321–338.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato: Theaetetus*. Translation with notes. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

MCPHERRAN, M.L. (2010). Justice and Piety in the Digression of the *Theaetetus*. *Ancient Philosophy*, 30, pp. 73–94.

MINTZ, A.I. (2011). Four Educators in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 45, pp. 657–673.

NIEHUES-PRÖBSTING, H. (1982). Die 'Episode' im 'Theaitetos', Verschärfung der Begriffe von Rhetorik und Philosophie. *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 26, pp. 7–24.

POLANSKY, R. (1992). *Philosophy and Knowledge, a Commentary on Plato's* Theaetetus. Bucknell University Press. London.

RYLE, G. (1966). *Plato's Progress*. The University Press. Cambridge.

SCHLEIERMACHER, F. (1836) (repr. 1973, trans. W. DOBSON). *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*. Arno Press. New York.

SEDLEY, D. (2004=2011). *The Midwife of Platonism, Text and Subtext in Plato's* Theaetetus. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

SPINELLI, E. (2002). Socratismo, Platonismo e arte della vita. Ancora sulla digressione del *Teeteto* (172c–177c). In: CASERTANO, G. (ed.). *Il* Teeteto *di Platone: struttura e problematiche*. Loffredo. Napoli.

TAYLOR, A.E. (1934). *Plato, the Man and his Work*, Methuen and Co Ltd., London.

TRABATTONI, F. (2020). *Peritrope* Once Again. In: BOSSI, B.; ROBINSON, T.M. (eds.), *Plato's* Theaetetus *Revisited*. deGruyter. Berlin, pp. 89–106.

SECTION 4

Images of the Cognitive Soul

CHAPTER 9

The Ontological Background of the Wax Block Model in Plato's *Theaetetus*

Francesco Aronadio

1

When Theaetetus proposes his second response to Socrates' question "what is *epistēmē?*", it is immediately clear that the issue at stake has changed its appearance. Claiming that *epistēmē* is *alēthēs doxa* involves cognition not being considered as an immediate and simple experience of the object (of the *cognoscendum*) and, consequently, different components of the cognitive process having to be taken into account: primarily, the difference between true and false belief, but also that between different aspects or moments of that process. Moreover, it is immediately clear that the test for the equivalence of *episteme* and *alēthēs doxa* will be the capacity to account for mistakes, i.e. the formation of false beliefs.

As is well known, the two interlocutors formulate five attempts to conciliate the hypothesis that knowing is *doxazein* and the fact that we fall into error when we opine. And all the attempts are destined to be unsuccessful.

Among them, the fourth and the fifth ones share a peculiarity, inasmuch as they each propose something like a model to describe the cognitive process. Perhaps the word "model" is an exaggeration, because what the Wax Block Model (WBM) and the Aviary present is a partial image of the presumed *epistēmē*. In fact, they focus fundamentally on the problem of false belief, rather than a comprehensive structural reconstruction of the cognitive process or a comprehensive description of how the human mind works. Therefore, it is preferable to call it a metaphor and we shall see later the notable consequences this metaphorical aspect has on the significance of the WBM.

The position of the WBM within the dramatic development of the dialogue is relevant for another reason. If we consider the preceding three attempts to justify false belief, we will easily see that they seek a solution to the problem by remaining in the domain of the *doxa*.[1] The WBM, on the contrary, reconsiders

1 The first attempt (187e5–188c4) concerns the relation between *doxazein* and *eidenai*, explicitly excluding intermediate moments of the process (*manthanein kai epilanthanesthai*,

the role of perception in the cognitive process. It may appear a step backwards from the results gained in the analysis of Theaetetus' first response, which had concluded that *epistēmē* could not be *aisthēsis*. But in fact the reconsideration of *aisthēsis* corresponds to a progress in Socrates' argumentation: it aims to remedy to the inadequacies of the preceding three attempts. Although all concern relationships, each represents cognition in a static way, that is, as a possess of something by the mind or as a close and elementary relation between *cognoscens* and *cognoscendum*. The abandonment of a static description is precisely the point from which Socrates restarts after the failure of the preceding attempts:

> […] the fact is that we are caught in such a bind that it requires us to twist and test every line of argument till it squeaks. So see if this takes us forward. Is it possible for someone who didn't know something *before* to go on later to learn it (*mē eidota ti proteron hysteron mathein*)? […] And *then* (αὖθις) another thing, and another?[2]
>
> *Theaet.* 191c1–6

Immediately after Theaetetus' positive answer, Socrates continues by introducing the image of the wax block. It is clear that the novelty (or, better, one of the novelties) of the fourth attempt is the inclusion of the timeline into the consideration of (false) belief:[3] the attention of the two interlocutors is now shifted towards the dynamics of the cognitive process. And this opens a breach towards the involvement of other faculties or components relevant to this process.

188a2–3) involving, for instance, a possible role of memory. The second one (188c5–189b9) takes into account *to einai kai me*: instead of working on an "internal" relation between two mental states or mental acts, it tries to base the argument on the relation between the mental state/act of *doxazein* and its external object, supposing it be a direct relation (cf. 188e11–189a9). The third attempt (189b10–190e4) consists in the famous figure of *allodoxia*, according to which false belief would be the result of a confusion between two mental contents.

2 Here and hereafter the translation of the passages of *Theaetetus* are by ROWE (2015) (italics mine).

3 It can be noticed that the act of learning (*manthanein*) is exactly what was excluded in the first attempt, followed in this respect by the next two. On the innovative aspect of WBM, FERRARI (2011), p. 101, writes: «indubbiamente il modello del "blocco di cera" introduce alcuni elementi innovativi, primo fra tutti la distinzione fra memoria e percezione immediata. In questo modo viene formalizzato un motivo che era forse implicito nelle spiegazioni precedenti, ossia la *profondità temporale* del soggetto».

The recourse to a metaphorical representation of the formation of *doxai* and the dynamic conception of this process are the aspects on which the following considerations about the WBM will be based on. Unavoidably, other important aspects of this page of the *Theaetetus* will have to be left aside.

Focusing on those aspects, anyway, will be of some help in pursuing one of the aims of this paper, which is to show from a new perspective why the WBM too, despite its apparent efficacy, ends inevitably in defeat.

Most of the literature on this topic converges on the idea that the WBM is considered by Plato as an adequate model for the description of that part of the cognitive process that regards the relation between *aisthēsis* and *dianoia* by means of *mnēmē*.[4] According to this interpretation, the reason why the WBM is abandoned and the interlocutors try to face the problem of false belief by introducing the Aviary Model is that the WBM is not comprehensive, inasmuch as it fails to explain a circumscribed type of false beliefs, i.e. those beliefs that originate from relations between thoughts (*ennoiai*), "mental contents" not deriving from *aisthēsis*.[5] This interpretation is apparently justified by certain passages where Socrates seems to show some satisfaction with the explanatory capacity of the WBM,[6] and even the passage where Socrates confesses his dissatisfaction sounds like a confirmation: after having noticed that someone who knows the eleven and the twelve can say that five plus seven equals eleven, he concludes:

> The person to whom this happens will be thinking that something he knows is something else he knows, which we said was impossible; and on that very basis we were forcing through the conclusion that there was no such thing as false belief, because otherwise the same person would be forced into knowing and not knowing the same things at the same time. [...] Then we must declare believing what is false to be anything but the misalignment of thought with perception; because if it were that, there would never be falsehood in our thought by themselves.
>
> *Theaet.* 196b9–c7

4 So BURNYEAT (1990): «The Wax Block remains adequate for mistaken identifications where perception is involved; the only failing charged against it was that it does not explain mistaken identification where perception is not involved». Cf. also SEDLEY (2004), pp. 137–139, and ROWE (2015), p. 77 note 90, who, however, mitigates his stance by adding «presumably».

5 CORNFORD (1935), pp. 129–130; MCDOWELL (1973), pp. 218–219; BOSTOCK (1988), pp. 180–185; GIANNOPOULOU (2013), pp. 136–142. More cautious as regards the global evaluation of WBM efficacy are SAYRE (1969), p. 112, and POLANSKY (1992) p. 194.

6 Cf. *Theaet.* 194c1 and 195b2–8.

It seems that by these words Plato wants to ascribe the failure of the WBM exclusively to its inadequacy to justify «falsehood in our thought by themselves». Instead, we shall see that his mistrust of the WBM is more generally founded.[7]

Before focusing on the issues that I would like to highlight here, I think it appropriate to mention a few more features of the WBM. The perceptual process is described as a mechanical impact:

> I want you to suppose, for the sake of argument (*logou heneka*), that our souls contain a waxen block. [...] we imprint (*apotypousthai*) on it whatever we wish to remember from among the things we see or hear or the thoughts we ourselves have, holding it under our perceptions and thoughts as if we were making impressions from signet rings.
>
> *Theaet*. 191c8–d9

In all likelihood, this description is influenced by pre-Socratic reflections on perceptual (and, in particular, visual) experience. After the "extromissionist"[8] ideas on visual perception, according to which the eyes emit fiery rays,[9] and after Alcmeon's and Anaxagoras' conceptions of vision as reflection,[10] Empedocles[11] and Democritus introduce an intromissionist theory of sight, based on the idea that effluences (for Empedocles) or air imprints (for Democritus) coming from outside reach the eyes and generate vision.[12] Particularly significant is that Democritus, according to Theophrastus' testimony, compares the air imprints to the imprints obtained by applying pressure on a wax mould.[13]

7 That the failure of WBM is due to a general inadequacy is maintained by CHAPPELL (2005) and TEISSERENC (2013), for reasons other than what I am going to argue: the former rejects WBM because of its empiricism, without further justifications; the latter believes that «la raison profonde de l'inadéquation d'un tel modèle tient à ce que toute doctrine de la vérité ou de la fausseté entendue comme accord ou désaccord *entre* représentations implique le refus initial, ou l'ignorance, de la différence radicale entre représentation et chose représentée» (p. 207).

8 For this terminology and for further consideration about this topic, see RUDOLPH (2015).

9 This conception is typical of archaic Greek poetry; cf., for instance, Homer, *Iliad* I, 101; Hesiod, *Theogony* vv. 826–7.

10 More on this in RUDOLPH (2015), pp. 39–44.

11 Cf. Empedocles, B84 and B89 DK.

12 Most of our information on pre-Socratic theories of perception comes from Theophrastus' *De sensibus* (in particular *De sens.* 7–24 on Empedocles [= A86 DK]; 27–37 [= A92 DK] on Anaxagoras; 50–54 [= A135 DK] on Democritus). On Empedocles see SEDLEY (1992); on Democritus NIGHTINGALE (1992), pp. 54–56; on Theophrastus' *De sensibus* see BALTUSSEN (2000).

13 Theophr. *De sensibus*, 51.

It is clear that Plato's WBM is indebted to these predecessors: in fact, the ratio of this model is the adoption of the intromissionist explanation of the formation of *doxai*. But it is equally clear that Empedocles' and Democritus' aim was inspired by a naturalistic or materialistic conception of reality, including cognitive processes. So, from Democritus' point of view the image of the wax mould is to be accepted in a quasi-literal way, since he conceived perception as a mechanical process involving matter, movement, and pressure. Plato's aim is obviously different, inasmuch as he takes into account the domain of *doxai* and, generally, *hai dianoiai*. His use of his predecessors' descriptions is characterised by the shifting to a metaphorical use of the physical aspects. This creates from the beginning, albeit not explicitly, a sort of friction between the materiality of the metaphor and the immateriality of the metaphorised soul.

So, the starting question is: (A) what consequences for the description of false beliefs are implicated in the adoption of a metaphor in which the soul is equated with a material matter such as a block of wax?

2

A first answer to (A) focuses on a (possible) positive aspect of choosing a material metaphor: the explanation of individual differences among souls. Indeed, there are two passages that could lead to the impression that this is the central point in the WBM. The first occurs at the very beginning of this part of Socrates' argument, when it is specified that the wax block «is larger in one person, small in another, of purer wax in one, filthier in another; in some it is too hard, in others too soft, while in still others it is as it should be».[14] Later Socrates returns to this point and compares the individual souls using vivid images («shaggy heart», «rough heart with a stony element», «tiny little soul», etc.),[15] to conclude that «all these people turn out to be liable to form false beliefs».[16]

Despite the fact that Socrates pays some attention to these details, I do not think that they are the core or the goal of the WBM. Even the second-mentioned passage, which is of a certain length, aims only to show that the human soul can fall into error, so much so that Socrates restarts his argumentation by asking «shall we say, then, that there are false beliefs in us?», and individual differences are no longer referred to. To sum up: on the one hand, the materiality of the WBM is particularly suitable for describing individual differences;

14 *Theaet.* 191c–9d2.
15 Cf. *Theaet.* 194e1–195a9.
16 *Theaet.* 195a5–6.

on the other hand, these differences concern the "phenomenology" of false beliefs and are of no help in describing the structure of the mind or in explaining the nature of false belief and its structural possibility. The quality of the wax is not the real cause of mistakes: the best quality of the soul cannot avoid the confusion of the eleven and twelve, which are supposed to be "known", as seen.[17] Therefore, the different qualities of the individual wax blocks are not the aspect to be investigated in order to understand the consequences of the adoption of a material metaphor.

To address this question, it is necessary to elucidate the real intent of the WBM. But the real intent of the introduction of the WBM as one of the attempts to verify Theaetetus' second response to Socrates' question about *epistēmē* can be discovered only if the reasons of its inadequacy are plainly understood, because we know that, as already mentioned, none of those attempts meet the expectations. I have already claimed that the prevalent explanation of the WBM inadequacy is not convincing: now is the moment to present an alternative proposal.[18] In my opinion, it is essential here to distinguish two levels of reading of the *Theaetetus* (as well as of most of Plato's dialogues). On a superficial level the introduction of the WBM (as well as of the other attempts) must play by the rules of the dramatic development of the dialogue. As this part of the *Theaetetus* is built as a sequence of attempts, the introduction of a new attempt needs to be justified in such a way that the concatenation is made visible and understandable. That Plato does not explicitly deny the explanatory capacity of the model as regards the relationship between *aisthesis* and *dianoia* and instead concludes the pages dedicated to the WBM by insisting on the inadequacy of the model in explaining false beliefs *en tais dianoiais* advances the investigation, because it has the effect of definitively shifting the axis of analysis towards the cognitive processes that take place entirely within the soul.

Below, or rather, behind the dramatic level it is possible to trace a deeper level: as is well known, in most cases Plato does not assign to the characters' words the task of making his doctrine explicit. It is up to the interpreter to extrapolate theoretical contents from the dialogical exchanges. The very reason for the introduction of the WBM could not be found in its final refutation.

17 It is worth noting that on both occasions when the different qualities of the wax block are taken into account, it is not affirmed that poor quality is the cause of erroneous imprints in the wax: these are only more precarious and less sharp. The mistake is not due to the lack of clarity of the imprint, but to the erroneous successive attribution of a new input to the imprint, provided that, obviously, the low quality makes the erroneous attribution more probable.

18 This proposal is more widely argued for in ARONADIO (2016).

Indeed, it must not be looked for here, in my opinion. Precisely because of the importance of the concatenation between the attempts, the reason for the introduction of the WBM lies in the differences that distinguish it from the previous attempts. As anticipated, the specific character of the WBM is the attempt to describe the formation of false beliefs as a dynamic cognitive process that involves *aisthēsis*, *mnēmē* and *dianoia*, rather than as a static presence in the mind of mental images compared one to another.[19]

The advantage gained by the adoption of the metaphor of the wax block consists in thinking of *doxai* as the result of a dynamics of mediation that takes place over time.[20] If this is so, then it is on this ground that the inadequacy of the WBM must be measured. And this is what I shall try to show in the following pages. For the moment, I take as a working hypothesis that "mediacy" is the specific contribution given by the introduction of the WBM to the deep level of reading of the dialogue. If I can show convincingly that the inadequacy of the WBM depends on a misleading conception of the processual character of the formation of *doxai*, the hypothesis will be confirmed or at least not proved wrong.

Now, focusing on mediacy our starting question takes on a new form: (B) what consequences for the description of false beliefs *as the result of a process that takes place over time* are implicated in the adoption of a metaphor in which the soul is equated with a material matter such as a block of wax?

3

At this point, it is necessary to examine in a little more detail how the mind works according to the WBM. It may be useful to recall here the initial passage, mentioned in part above:

19 Many scholars point out that the WBM imports several "faculties" into the consideration of *doxai*, of course; but this does not imply that the importance of the dynamic aspect has been adequately noticed. For instance, BURNYEAT (1990), p. 91, maintains that the novelty of the WBM consists «in its vivid depiction of perceiving and memory-knowledge as two independent ways an item can come before the mind to be an object of judgement»: by saying so, Burnyeat focuses on the comparison between perception and thought, whereas the relevant aspect is, in my opinion, the processual aspect of doxastic activity of mind. On Burnyeat's interpretative line are BOSTOCK (1988), p. 177, and POLANSKY (1992), p. 213 and pp. 216–217.

20 In addition to the aforementioned FERRARI (2011), p. 101, cf. also HARDY (2001), p. 177.

> I want you to suppose, for the sake of argument (*logou heneka*), that our souls contain a waxen block. [...] Let's say that it is a gift from Memory, mother of the Muses, and that we imprint (*apotypousthai*) on it whatever we wish (*boulethōmen*) to remember (*mnēmoneusai*) from among the things we see or hear or the thoughts we ourselves have, holding it under (*hypechontas*) our perceptions and thoughts as if we were making impressions from signet rings; whatever is imprinted on the block, we remember and know (*mnēmoneuein kai epistasthai*) for as long as (*eos an*) its image is in the wax, while whatever is wiped off or proves incapable of being imprinted we have forgotten and do not know.
>
> *Theaet.* 191c8–e1

There are some remarkable points here. Firstly, the wax is said to be a gift from Mnemosyne, which immediately highlights the role of memory in the WBM. Secondly, the coupled use of the verbs «remember» and «know» is worth noting: the model establishes that the imprint left by an input on the wax generates (or more and better *is*) knowledge.[21] This point is clearly taken for granted in the whole subsequent argumentation. It is particularly important because it connects knowledge to the temporality of memory, pointed out after all in this passage by the conjunction *eos*. Thirdly, the mnestic trace is represented as an impression, i.e. something that undergoes the effects of an impact and keeps the consequent modifications for a certain amount of time. So, memory is intended as simple and passive retention.[22]

But, as already said, memory is not the only element the plays a role in cognitive processes according to the WBM. The other elements emerge clearly from an example of formation of false beliefs:

> I know you and Theodorus, and I have the imprints of you both, as if from signet rings, in the wax block of mine. But suppose then that I see you both at a distance, and sufficiently well: in my eagerness to refer the imprint belonging to each of you to the corresponding visual perception, and to make the latter fit its own traces, so that recognition (ἀναγνώρισις)

21 Cf. *Theaet.* 192a2: «[...] a person knows something, having acquired a record of it in his soul».

22 BURNYEAT (1990), p. 100, IOPPOLO (1999), p. 227 note 161, and CAMBIANO (2007), p. 11, believe that the WBM does not describe the acquisition of data by memory as purely passive. They base this consideration on what Socrates affirms when he says that on the wax block «we imprint whatever we wish (*boulēthōmen*) to remember». However, I believe that this verb refers to the awareness of the *aisthesis* by the subject, but it does not affect the passive nature of the data acquisition in memory.

> can take place, I fail in this, switching things like someone putting his shoes on the wrong feet, and applying my perception of each of you to the other.
>
> *Theaet.* 193b9–c7

Here we find again the overlap of retention and knowledge, represented by the mnestic trace. The cognitive process consists in matching a perception with a mnestic trace in order to give rise to a recognition (ἀναγνώρισις). Some lines below Socrates says:

> with things that we both know and are perceiving […] belief twists and turns between false and true: true when it brings together the appropriate imprints and impressions directly and without deviation, false when it does the fitting in a skewed and sideways fashion.
>
> *Theaet.* 194b3–6

These passages make clear that the WBM involves a definite sequence: *a*) an input (that in the presented example comes from outside through perception, but can come also from inside through thinking activity); *b*) the imprint in the wax block; *c*) retention of the imprint; *d*) new input (perception or thought); *e*) matching of the new input with the imprint left by the preceding input. The mediated nature of the formation of beliefs, as it is metaphorised in the WBM, is evident; equally evident is that in this mediated succession the crucial role is played by memory: in fact, memory is the touchstone for the other elements of the process, which otherwise would remain isolated.

Here one major consequence of the adoption of a material metaphor becomes manifest. It concerns the nature of the relationship between *aisthesis* (or *dianoia*) and *mnēmē*. Some interesting hints can be found in the abovementioned passage: the wax block is said to be *held under* (*hypechontas*) our perceptions and thoughts. The verb *hypecho* means "hold under", but also "undergo, suffer"; the metaphorical rendering of *aisthēsis* (or *dianoia*) with a signet ring enhances the idea that the mind undergoes a "mechanical" or "physical" *pathos*, producing as its effect a direct transfer of the shape of the input to the wax. The materiality of the metaphor suggests that immediateness and directness are the features of the relationship between *aisthēsis* (or *dianoia*) and *mnēmē* (phases *a* and *b*). There is no mediation between these cognitive acts and their retention in memory; no mediation creates a distance between the input and its retention in memory – the signet ring acts by direct contact and the trace it leaves in the wax perfectly corresponds to it (provided that, obviously, the wax is in perfect conditions; but this, as we have seen, is

a contingent factor). And this is why, according to the conceptual framework imposed by the WBM, what is memorized is immediately a piece of knowledge. Even the final refutation of the WBM can confirm that the peculiarity of the supposed relation between *dianoia* and memory excludes any mediation: when Socrates affirms about «five and seven by themselves» [*scilicet*: internal inputs] that «are memories stored in that block of wax […] about which we're saying it is not possible to believe what is false», he evidently presupposes that the imprints left by these internal inputs are necessarily in perfect correspondence with their traces on wax.[23]

Moreover, not only the relationship between *aisthēsis* (or *dianoia*) and *mnēmē*, but also that between the successive new input and memory (phases *d* and *e*) is, in a certain sense, characterised by directness, inasmuch as it is a one-to-one alignment, that is an alignment between a single unit (the new input, internal or external) and the single trace in the wax.

Therefore, in short, the WBM represents the thematized part of cognition – i.e. the formation of beliefs, and in particular of false beliefs – as a process whose mediated nature is articulated in a sequence of direct relationships; it is a process that takes place over time and develops as a one-to-one juxtaposition; this process originates from an internal or external input (a perception or a thought) that impacts memory; this impact gives rise immediately to a piece of knowledge.

4

In other words, we can say that the WBM is based on a specific kind of sequential process, on the equivalence of internal and external origin of the cognitive act, and on the identification of knowledge and memory. These aspects appear to be very close to the way the encyclopaedia of an oral culture is built. The similarity between what has been said about the features of the WBM and the process of formation of a shared cultural patrimony in orality could appear surprising; but I think it is not. Some quotations from Havelock's *Preface to Plato*,[24] which is now a classic, will in themselves be emblematic: «The images evoked in the verbs and in the nouns succeed each other paratactically; each

23 As known, the refutation argument is this: according to the WBM, mistakes are the effect of some kind of misalignment between a piece of information and its memorization; although a misalignment between an external input and the internal trace is conceivable, the same is impossible for an internal input; but mistakes related to thoughts occur; so, the WBM must be rejected, since it does not explain all the cases of mistake.

24 HAVELOCK (1963).

unit of meaning is self-subsistent».[25] An oral culture builds up its patrimony of knowledge by putting together a large number of these paratactical, one-to-one associations, which require the deployment of an enormous mnemonic capacity. «The epic therefore is […] to be considered in the first instance not as an act of creation but as an act of reminder and recall. Its patron muse is indeed *Mnēmosune* in whom is symbolised not just the memory considered as a mental phenomenon but rather the total act of reminding, recalling, memorialising, and memorising».[26] The crucial role of memory for paratactically organized knowledge is necessarily accompanied by the lack of a critical approach and, in a word, by loss of self and loss of the object: «For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known».[27] The dimensions of the interiority and the exteriority are confused with each other: the actions and notions learned are thoughts, and thoughts are one with active participation in the sequence of events, whether narrated or real. Speaking of primary oral cultures, Ong affirms: «Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax».[28]

Identification of knowledge and memory, paratactical order, interchangeability of inside and outside are evidently common features of orality and the WBM (at the respective different levels, of course). These similarities could appear surprising, but they are not: they are closely related to a purely and rudimentarily empiricistic conception of the relationship between thought and experience.

As is well known, the question of Plato's attitude towards orality (both in a cultural sense and in a narrower "paideutic" sense) is very complicated and much debated, but one thing is indisputable: overall, Plato's pattern of thinking and the framework of his thought entail characteristics diametrically opposed to those which have appeared as the common denominator of the WBM and

---

25 HAVELOCK (1963), p. 184.

26 HAVELOCK (1963), p. 91.

27 ONG (2002), p. 45. Cf. HAVELOCK (1963), pp. 44–45: «How is such a feat of memory to be placed within the reach not only of the gifted but of the average member of the group, for all have to retain a minimal grasp of the tradition? Only […] by exploiting psychological resources latent and available in the consciousness of every individual […]. This psychological mechanism […] can be summed up if we describe it as a state of total personal involvement and therefore of emotional identification with the substance of the posited statement that you are required to retain. […] Such enormous powers of poetic memorisation could be purchased only at the cost of total loss of objectivity».

28 ONG (2002), p. 34.

orality.[29] But, apart from this general consideration, what is important here is a matter of formal configuration of the relationship between the flow of events and the way in which they come to constitute a patrimony of beliefs: from a Platonic point of view, a paratactic configuration unavoidably relegates thought to the empirical domain and to corporeality. In Havelock's words: «In short, this kind of knowledge that is built up in the tribal memory by the oral poetic process is subject precisely to the three limitations described by Plato as characteristic of "opinion" (*doxa*). It is a knowledge of "happenings" (*gignomena*) which are sharply experienced in separate units and so are pluralised (*polla*) rather than being integrated into systems of cause end effect. And these units of experience are visually concrete; they are "visibles" (*horata*)».[30] By introducing a material metaphor to describe the mind, the WBM proposes a description of the formation of beliefs that corresponds to these aspects contrasted by Plato: the materiality of the wax block induces a paratactic conception of the mediacy of cognitive processes and assigns the role of knowledge to the memorization and retention of non-interconnected data.

In light of this, the response sought to our question (B) might sound like this: a soul conceived as a material stuff lends itself to a paratactic conception of temporality that, from a Platonic point of view, is a paradoxical internalization of the sequentiality typical of the dimension of events and of an archaic mode of memory. Moreover, a paratactic sequence is necessarily a connection between isolated units (perception or thoughts): in fact, according to the WBM each individual unit of information leaves a single trace in the wax. Therefore, what is memorised by a soul conceived as material is punctual and fragmented: as a result, memory is presented as a list or an inventory of information, where each unit is at most comparable with another single unit, but it does not appear to be designed to make interconnections between memorised elements of information.

5

The correspondences between WBM and orality have made it possible to highlight the co-presence and interrelation between materiality/corporeality,

---

29 In a schematic way (as it is not worth insisting on this point): to the psychological and conservative identification of knowledge and memory Plato counterposes the ontologically founded notion of a timeless *epistēmē*; to the paratactical order, a syntactic elaboration of experience; to the interchangeability of inside and outside, the polarities "*aisthēsis*/*dianoia*" and "*soma*/*psychē*".

30 HAVELOCK (1963), p. 180.

on the one hand, and parataxis, on the other; that is to say the link between reliance on the domain of immediate experience (which in *Gorgias* is called *empeiria*) and the elementary nature of the information contents and their concatenations, on the other hand. Due to the adoption of a material metaphor, the mediacy of the cognitive processes is configured as a mere cause-effect relationship between singular events. These considerations reinforce the idea that the inadequacy of the WBM has deeper roots than the dramatic development of dialogue suggests. Indeed, the fact that Socrates proves that the WBM does not work *en tais dianoiais* does not imply that this is the only flaw in the system; the possibility is open that, from Plato's point of view, the WBM presents other flaws on which Socrates the character does not insist, since it is functional for the purposes of the dramatic development of the dialogue to limit the refutation to the case of thought content only. In short, the possibility is open that the inadequacy of the WBM is more comprehensive. To this formal possibility good reasons have now been added by which we can see Plato's greater dissatisfaction with the WBM.

In my opinion, in fact, the WBM does not correspond, even in part, to the way in which Plato conceived the cognitive processes and their articulation in different phases: the mediacy of the WBM consists in a purely mechanical movement that cannot represent what cognitive activity is for Plato. The image of the block of wax presents a model of a soul that, like the body, is only passively dependent on the inputs coming from immediate experience. If the innovative contribution of the WBM compared to previous attempts consists in the introduction of a dynamic vision of cognitive processes, the dynamic that is presented through the WBM, being strongly conditioned by the chosen metaphor, is a dynamic too tied to the dimension of the empirical and too indebted to a conception of the subject-reality relationship that was typical of an archaic mentality – a mentality that Plato continually strives to leave behind (although, of course, in many respects he is still a participant in it).

There are two characteristics that are missing in the image of cognitive processes that arises from the wax block metaphor: the autonomous role of the *psyche* in its interaction with the *aisthēsis* and the ability to reprocess inputs. On the contrary, the WBM is based on the passivity of the mind (which, like a block of wax, is limited to accepting imprints) and on the punctual and fragmented contents of memory.[31] In the section of the *Theaetetus* dedicated to *koina*[32] these two characteristics had already been highlighted as essential for understanding the relationship between perceptions and soul activity.

31 See on this MAGRI (2015), pp. 47–49.

32 *Theaet.* 184b3–187a6.

That section of the dialogue closes the long part dedicated to Theaetetus' first answer to the question "what is *epistēmē*?": in showing the inadequacy of the thesis according to which *epistēmē* is *aisthēsis*, Plato introduces some positive doctrinal elements, which constitute a milestone in the argumentative path of dialogue. The subsequent attempts must therefore be commensurate with it: one of the reasons why they will prove to be insufficient may in fact be their discordance with the conceptual framework introduced in the section on *koina*.

In this framework the soul is conceived as *a*) capable of providing an autonomous contribution to the cognitive path, establishing a functional link between exteriority and interiority, and *b*) capable of acquiring a first but fundamental form of data already characterized by some complexity (for example, relationships of similarity and dissimilarity) and capable of making comparisons. That is to say that the soul is in such a position to provide to the *dianoia* data that already passed through a first processing phase and are ready to be not only stored in memory, but also reprocessed.[33] This emerges clearly from the way Socrates argues and from the terminology he uses. Three points of his argumentation are here relevant: 1) without the cognitive role played by the soul, the sensory data would give rise to a heterogeneous and ungovernable multiplicity.[34] 2) the specific role played by the soul in this phase of the cognitive process is efficaciously indicated by the verbs used by Socrates and consists in «going close up» (*epaniousa*, 186b8) to sensory data, «comparing them with each other» (*symballousa*, 186b8) and «reckoning up (*analogizomenē*) in itself past and present in comparison with future» (186a11–b1);[35] 3) by doing so, i.e. by spotting and comparing and memorizing, the soul, while remaining on the side of *aisthēsis*,[36] carries out an initial processing activity that prepares the judgement activity in the full sense. In light of this, memory is not a simple storage of individual and fragmentated data: the role of memory comes

33 As is well known, the section on the *koina* has been variously interpreted. I expounded my reading key in ARONADIO (2016), pp. 173–205. In short, I believe that the *koina* are related to the soul's ability to make comparisons; this ability does not yet (at least, not immediately) involve formulation of judgments; for the *koina* are still in close relationship with the domain of *aisthesis* or, more precisely, they are the result of a first, only comparative elaboration of sensory data.

34 Cf. *Theaet.* 184d1–5, where Plato presents the emblematic image of a multiplicity of data collected in us as in wooden horses.

35 This is the moment in which memory enters the scene. An interesting passage of the *Philebus* (32d2–34c3) introduces an important distinction between *mneme*, intended as «preservation of perceptions» (*soteria aisthēseos*), and *anamnēsis*, understood as the soul's recalling, by itself and apart from the body, the experiences it has had together with the body. More on this in ARONADIO (2016), pp. 186–188.

36 As it is acknowledged by SEDLEY (1992), p. 111, and FERRARI (2011), p. 412 note 254.

into play when the soul has already accomplished its *analogismata* (186c3); therefore, memory does not deal with isolated issues but with pre-elaborated data ready for further elaboration. I referred above to a sort of friction between the materiality of the metaphor and the immateriality of the metaphorized soul: what we have seen about the *koina* and the soul's ability explains the reasons for that friction. There is a great difference between the dynamics envisaged in the section on the *koina* and the mediacy implied by the WBM: it should be clear now that the materiality of the metaphor adopted in the WBM impoverishes the syntactic dynamics of cognitive processes, reducing it to one-to-one paratactical sequences.

6

Taking the section on the *koina* as the expression of Plato's own conception, the correct sequence of the considered part of cognitive processes is: *a*) input (that comes from outside through the perception); *b*) soul's activity, pointed towards *koina* and based on *analogismata* (which implies recognition of relationships among data); *c*) memorization (of already elaborated data); *d*) dianoetic thought. What differentiates this sequence from the one implied by the WBM is the role of memory: here memory does note precede, on the contrary it follows the soul's activity of comparison and (initial) elaboration.

There are three implications here. Firstly, these conclusions induce one to counterpose to the nexus parataxis-materiality another nexus, syntaxis-immateriality, that clearly is much more in line with Plato's thought. This is why I maintain that the inadequacy of the WBM has deeper roots than the dramatic level of the dialogue suggests. But, to remain at the circumscribed problem of false belief, that is at the origin both of the WBM and of the other attempts to solve this problem, the materiality of the metaphor of the WBM is an obstacle to the understanding of the possibility of mistakes because it obscures Plato's conviction that true *doxai* as well as false ones cannot but be the result of some kind of previous processing of information deriving from perception. If it is admitted that the active component of the cognitive process precedes storage, and that the data stored in memory can take on a complex (rather than elementary) and organic (rather than fragmented) aspect, then the memory turns out to be syntactic rather than paratactic, synthetic rather than sequential.[37]

37 The passage of *Philebus* where Plato address the issue of memory by using the famous image of the scribe (*Phil.* 38e12–39a7) show that he does not consider memory as a simple

Secondly, this interpretation of Plato's conception of cognitive processes is ultimately symmetrical to his one-on-many conceptual scheme. As seen previously, the WBM presupposes a certain configuration of temporality, marked by the simple succession of events. On the contrary, the syntactic structure of memorized information and the autonomy of the interiority in the elaboration of external data predisposes to a conception of the object of knowledge as situated in an extra-temporal dimension (or, better, in the dimension of the *aei onta*, the everlasting Forms).

Thirdly, a less apparent, but philosophically relevant limit of the WBM is that it is unable to account for any progress in knowledge, which is instead necessary from a Platonic point of view. In the words of Rowett, «although we now get a richer account of what it is to see someone as Theaetetus, the idea of "Theaetetus" that is deployed in that recognition is no more generic, abstract or interpreted than the current encounter with him. The wax block does not develop any distinction between types and tokens, because the mental contents are also singular tokens that were once encountered directly in particular experiences with particular things».[38] This means that each new experience does not enrich in any way the knowledge of the knowing subject. In Plato's view only the existence of Forms and the soul's recollection guarantee the possibility of cognitive ascent. So, the ontological background of the WBM is an ontology confined to the domain of experience, an ontology without Forms.

References

ARONADIO, F. (2016). *L'*aisthesis *e le strategie argomentative di Platone nel* Teeteto. Bibliopolis. Napoli.

BALTUSSEN, H. (2000). *Theophrastus'* De sensibus. In: Id., *Theophrastus against the Presocratics and Plato. Peripatetic Dialectic in the* De sensibus. Brill. Leiden, pp. 11–30.

BOSTOCK, D. (1988). *Plato's* Theaetetus. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

CAMBIANO, G. (2007). *Problemi della memoria in Platone*. In: M.M. SASSI (ed.), *Tracce della memoria da Platone ai moderni*. ETS. Pisa, pp. 1–23.

CHAPPELL, T. (2005). *Reading Plato's* Theaetetus. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

reproduction of an input in an imprint: rather, memory is a transcription, which implies that some activity is supposed to be performed between the perception and the storage in memory. Cf. DIXSAUT (2006), p. 19: «[…] ce n'est jamais une sensation pure que le scribe inscrit dans le livre, mais une sensation nommée, interprétée».

38 ROWETT (2012), p. 161. See also FERRARI (2011), p. 101.

CORNFORD, F.M.D. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.

DIXSAUT, M. (2006). *Platon et ses deux mémoires*. In: BRANCACCI, A.; GIGLIOTTI, G. (eds.), *Mémoires et souvenir*. Bibliopolis. Napoli, pp. 13–45.

FERRARI, F. (2011). *Platone: Teeteto*. BUR. Milano.

GIANNOPOULOU, Z. (2013). *Plato's* Theaetetus *as a Second Apology*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

HARDY, J. (2001). *Platons Theorie des Wissens im* Theaitet. Vanderhoeck und Ruprecht. Göttingen.

HAVELOCK, E. (1963). *Preface to Plato*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge MA.

IOPPOLO, A.M. (1999). *Platone. Teeteto*. Laterza. Roma-Bari.

MAGRI, E. (2015). *Holon* e *Heteron*: Osservazioni per un collegamento fra il *Teeteto e il Sofista*. *Journal of Ancient Philosophy*, 9. pp. 34–66.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato: Theaetetus*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

NIGHTINGALE, A. (1992). Sight and the Philosophy of Vision in Classical Greece. Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle. In: FORTENBAUGH, W.W.; GUTAS, D. (eds). *Theophrastus: His Psychological, Doxographical and Scientific Writing*. Transaction Books. New Brunswick pp. 54–67.

ONG, W.J. (2002). *Orality and Literacy*. Routledge. London-New York.

POLANSKY, R.M. (1992). *Philosophy and knowledge: a commentary on Plato's* Theaetetus. Bucknell University Press. Lewisburg-London-Toronto.

ROWE, C. (2015). *Plato. Theaetetus and Sophist*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge MA.

ROWETT, C. (2012). On Making Mistakes in Plato: Theaetetus 187c–200d. *Topoi*, 31, pp. 151–166.

RUDOLPH, K. (2015). Sight and the Presocratics: Approaches to Visual Perception in Early Greek Philosophy. In: Squire, M. (ed.). *Sight and the Ancient Senses*. Routledge. London, pp. 36–53.

SAYRE, K.M. (1969). *Plato's Analytic Method*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

SEDLEY, D. (1992). *Empedocles' Theory of Vision and Theophrastus'* De Sensibus. In: FORTENBAUGH, W.W.; GUTAS, D. (eds.). *Theophrastus: His Psychological, Doxographical and Scientific Writing*. Transaction Books. New Brunswick, pp. 20–31.

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism. Text and Subtext in Plato's* Theaetetus. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

TEISSERENC, F. (2013). *Pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas de définition de la science? Une lecture aporétique du Théététe*. In: EL MURR, D. (ed.). *La mesure du savoir. Études sur le* Théétète *de Platon*. Vrin. Paris, pp. 189–222.

CHAPTER 10

The Soul as an Aviary: A Metaphorical and Metaphysical Reading of *Theaetetus* 196c7–200d4

Emanuele Maffi

1 Introduction

The destiny of a metaphor is to be open to different interpretations. In the second definition of knowledge – *epistēmē* is true belief – Plato makes a large use of metaphors about the human soul in order to explain how a false opinion may arise in it; unfortunately, none of these analogies can clarify the riddle of false belief. Even if these metaphors missed their target, they remain very well-known in western philosophical tradition because of the crucial role they play in depicting the nature and the power of the soul. The two most famous analogies Socrates uses in his attempt to explain the existence and the possibility of false belief in the soul are the Wax Tablet image and the Aviary model. In the following pages I will focus my attention on the image of the Aviary, through which Plato depicts how the soul can possess knowledge, and how the false belief may occur in the soul process of acquiring knowledge. Despite the Aviary model's failure in explaining how false opinion arises in the soul, I argue that the Aviary plays another important role in this section of the dialogue. Hinted behind the collapse of the Aviary model we can find some clear references to the theory of Recollection explained in the *Meno*: through the failure of the Aviary, Plato invites his readers to recognize the link between this model and the *Meno* doctrine of anamnesis. In this way Plato provides essential information: in order to really appreciate the piece of doctrine that the final refutation of the second definition of *epistēmē* (the so-called "Jury argument" at 200d5–201c7) and the last part of *Theaetetus* (the analysis of the third definition of *epistēmē*) contribute to Plato's theory of knowledge, these parts must be put into the epistemological framework of the *Meno* and of the middle dialogues.

2 The Aviary and Its Inability to Explain False Belief

Socrates introduces the Aviary model in order to solve an *aporia* that the Wax Tablet model was unable to deal with. According to the Wax Block image, the

false belief occurs only when there is a mismatch between a thought and a perception, but not between two objects of thought. In the Wax Block, in fact, mistakes are possible in such cases where the subject of my *doxa*, whether or not it is something I know (i.e. for which I have an existing imprint in my mental wax), is something which I perceive but connect to a different and inappropriate imprint. It is through such a connection that the soul can sometimes falsely believe that what it knows is something else it knows, or else that what it knows is something else it doesn't even know (191e7–9). I can wrongly believe that the person walking towards me from a distance is Theaetetus, when he is in fact either Theodorus or even someone altogether unknown to me, because I can erroneously apply my impression of Theaetetus to the indistinct perception of the person walking towards me. Socrates thus compares the soul that judges falsely to a bad archer who misses his mark (194a3–4). But what Socrates is now looking for is a model which can cater for the successes and failures not just of empirical judgements but also of operations in pure thought. As we can read in the following passage of the dialogue, the Wax Tablet model fails because it reveals its inadequacy to explain that there are false beliefs about arithmetic:

> But look, don't you think that anyone has ever considered five and seven? I don't mean: "has considered seven *men* and five *men* who are placed in front of him", or anything like that. I mean five and seven themselves, the things that according to us are memory-signs made on the wax block tablet, and about which we say there can be no false belief. Has no human to date ever considered *this* five and seven, or spoken to himself to ask how many they come to? Haven't some people said and thought that five and seven were *eleven*, while others said *twelve*? Or does *everyone* say and think that five and seven are twelve?[1]
>
> *Theaet.* 195e9–196a9

The image of the soul as a Wax Block apparatus has sufficed to illustrate one class of mistakes: the wrong fitting-together of old records and new impressions. But Socrates and Theaetetus have now realized that this formula will not cover the instance of mistaking of one memory record for another, and so it will not suffice as a general account of false judgement. Cornford rightly notes that «we cannot admit mistakes about numbers, unless we can find a sense in which we cannot know something we do know».[2] To accomplish this task, the machinery of the wax block must be enlarged by a new model. This enlarged

1 All translations of *Theaetetus* passages are taken from CHAPPELL (2004).

2 CORNFORD (1935), p. 130.

apparatus is described by Plato through the simile by which the soul is compared with an Aviary.

We can roughly divide the Aviary model into two parts. In the first, which goes from 196d to 199a, Plato offers us some important and promising items not only to solve the riddle of false opinion, but also to answer the central question of the dialogue: "What is knowledge?". In the second part, which goes from 199b to 200c, Plato rejects the Aviary as insufficient explanation of the existence of the false. This is due to the fact that the Aviary model cannot escape from the so-called "puzzle of false belief" introduced by Socrates in 188a–c. This puzzle can be summarized as follows. For all *x* and *y*, you can't form the false belief that "*x* is *y*" either (a) where you know both *x* and *y*, or (b), where you know neither *x* nor *y*. For in (a) if you know both *x* and *y*, then you know that none of them is identical with the other; and (b) if neither of them is known to you, then you cannot think about it at all. But (a) e (b) are exhaustive alternatives. So false belief is impossible.[3]

As rightly noted by Ferrari, the impossibility of false belief in the "puzzle" occurs because Plato still maintains a strong paradigm for the notion of knowledge, grounded on a principle that some scholars call "all-or-nothing principle"[4] according to which «A either knows X or does not know X: Knowledge is either *on* or *off*, 1 or 0».[5]

I will focus my attention mainly on the first part of the Aviary model, because I believe that Plato scatters in it some clues not only about the nature of knowledge, but also about the way in which Forms, as metaphysical entities, can be known.

As highlighted by Trabattoni, the passage concerning the image of the Aviary starts with a very important question posed by Socrates to Theaetetus:[6]

> So now either there is no false belief, or else it is possible for someone to be ignorant of the very things he knows. Which of these alternatives will you choose? I have no idea how to choose between them, Socrates.
>
> *Theaet.* 196c7–9

For Theaetetus the choice is hard: while, on the one hand, the existence of the false is impossible to deny, on the other hand it seems to Theaetetus just as logically impossible to say that someone can, at the same time, know and not

3 I borrowed this summary of the puzzle from CHAPPELL (2008), p. 203.
4 See FERRARI (2011), p. 94.
5 ROOCHNIK (2002), p. 45.
6 See TRABATTONI (2018), n. 318, p. 235.

know the same thing. And it is not surprising, because by virtue of the idea of knowledge supported by Socrates and Theaetetus at 188a–c, to say that A knows the object X means saying that A knows everything about X, while to say that A does not know the object X means saying that A does not know anything at all about X.

To get out of the impasse, Socrates lays aside all shame and, even if he has not yet well-defined what knowledge is, he at least tries to describe what knowledge is like (196d5–6: *poion ti pot'estin to epistasthai*; and 197a4–5: *boulei tolmēsō eipeîn hoîon esti to epistasthai*). So Socrates tells Theaetetus that nowadays people tend to describe *to epistasthai* as the holding (*hexis*) of knowledge; but he chooses to make a slight amendment and suggests that *to epistasthai* is the possessing (*ktêsis*) of knowledge.[7] In this way Socrates displays a distinction between two kinds of knowledge: there is an active type that may be described as having knowledge in hand (*epistēmēs hexis*) and a latent type of knowledge, previously acquired, that is described as a knowledge that someone merely possesses without actually using it (*epistēmēs ktêsis*).

To provide a better clarification of the distinction proposed above, Socrates introduces the Aviary: it might be a model of the soul capable of explaining the role played by these two types in the process of building knowledge in the human being.

The holding-having (*hexis*) of knowledge is described as a power comparable to that of a man who possess birds in a cage (197c8ff.): just as such man has the power to seize at will one of the birds within his cage, so the man who possess knowledge has the power to seize any pieces of this knowledge within his soul. Instead, as we can see in the passage 197e2–6, the possessing (*ktêsis*) of knowledge occurs when a person acquires pieces of knowledge and shuts them up in his cage-soul: in this way we can affirm that «he has learned or discovered whatever it is that the knowledge itself is about, and that this is what knowledge is» (197e5–6). So for Socrates the true meaning of the action of knowing (*to epistasthai*) something is to capture its knowledge and lock it in the cage of one's soul; namely, for Socrates *to epistasthai* means to possess knowledge.

According to the Aviary model, the soul who possesses knowledge must have the power of hunting and catching the knowledge-birds as well as the power of keeping them in the cage to prevent them from escaping, while the soul who has the knowledge must have the power to seize them again at will once

7 To explain to Theaetetus the difference between holding and possessing a thing, Socrates presents him with the following example: «If someone buys a cloak he can do what he wants with it. But if he is not wearing it, we will still say that he possesses the cloak but he is not holding it» (197b8–9).

they are stored in the cage. That this is the right way to understand the different powers of the soul in its double activity of possessing and having knowledge, I think that it is confirmed few lines later when Plato compares the two sorts of knowledge with two kinds of hunting.

> One sort of hunt happens before you possess the pigeon, and has coming to possess the pigeon as its object. The other sort of hunt happens when it is already a long time since you came to possess the pigeon, and aims at recapturing a pigeon and holding it in your hands. Just likewise, it may be a long time since a man came to learn a piece of knowledge, and first knew it. It's still possible for him to renew his knowledge of those same pieces of knowledge, each of which he came to possess long before, but did not have to handle in his thought. He can do it by laying his hands once more on the knowledge of each thing, and holding it tight.
>
> *Theaet.* 198d2–9

The thesis I support here is that the two sorts of hunting may be interpreted not only as Socrates does in the next passage of the dialogues, more precisely from 199a6, but also in a metaphorical and metaphysical way. Let's start with the Socratic treatment of these two kinds of hunting. When Socrates establishes that it never happens that someone *does not know* what he knows, it is clear that he has never abandoned the strong idea of knowledge being grounded on the "all or nothing principle" as a guideline.[8] But this principle is precisely what makes the existence of error impossible, because it claims that whoever knows anything about something must also know everything about it. Within the horizon of this principle there is no room for false belief, because inside the boundary of the "all/nothing principle" even the distinction between possessing and having is useless; as Gonzalez truthfully observes, «the specific problem lies in the nature of the "having knowledge"».[9] In fact, if this type of knowledge must be set apart from the possession of knowledge, the *hexis* of knowledge «can apparently only mean being aware or conscious of this possessed knowledge, attending to it (as is suggested by the language at 198d8: *procheiron… tē dianoia*)».[10] But, as Socrates quickly realizes, in this case the account of the occurrence of false belief is doomed to failure. If in adding five and seven I grasp my knowledge of eleven rather than my knowledge of twelve,

8 STERN (2008), p. 251.

9 GONZALEZ (2007), p. 4.

10 GONZALEZ (2007), p. 4. As correctly FERRARI (2011), p. 104 points out Socrates and Theaetetus cannot get out themselves from the *impasse* because they are still bounded to the idea that «la conoscenza sia un fenomeno immediato, aprocessuale e quasi visualistico, indirizzato verso oggetti costitutivamente semplici e irrelati».

I must immediately see that eleven is not what I was looking for. I might grab the wrong bird, but if this is a bird I "know", I will immediately recognize it to be the wrong bird. Even if it is possible for me to seize eleven rather than twelve, once I have seized it there is no way I can confuse it for twelve (199d). So what the aviary model failed to explain is how we can know and not know at the same time. As Polansky rightly wrote:

> yet quite incredibly, the aviary prohibits simultaneous possession and non-possession of knowledge only to permit simultaneous *having and not having* of knowledge. [...] The difficulty of knowing and not knowing has been eliminated on the level of possession only to emerge on the level of having.[11]

What had been thrown out of the door (the impossibility of possessing and non-possessing, at the same time, the knowledge of a thing) now flies back through the window (on the level of having and not having, at the same time, the knowledge of a thing). If it is not possible for me to have and, at the same time, not have the knowledge of twelve, I can never grasp the eleven-bird instead of the twelve, because I cannot confuse something I know with something else that I also know! If it were the case, as Socrates states by his objection, the aviary analogy would lead us to a paradoxical conclusion: the knowledge of the numbers eleven and twelve would be the explanation of our not knowing that five and seven makes twelve (199d2–8). So because of the Aviary model's failure to explain the false opinion, its existence still remains something incomprehensible. Even Socrates and Theaetetus are both forced to draw this conclusion at 200a10–b6:

> So after all our long detours, here we are once more, face to face with the first puzzle! That prize contradictor we mentioned will just laugh at us, and say this: "Oh, you outstanding persons! So someone who knows both a knowledge-bird and an ignorance-bird – he thinks that one of them, which he knows, is the other of them, which he also knows? Or is it that he does not know either of them, and believes that the one which he doesn't know is the other, which he also doesn't know? Or is it that he knows one of them and not the other, and thinks that the one that he knows is the other that he doesn't know, or that the one that he doesn't know is the one that he does know?"
>
> *Theaet.* 200a10–b6

11 POLANSKY (1992), pp. 198–199.

If the Aviary-soul model is not able to explain how the false opinion occurs, what is the role played by this metaphor in the dialogue? Or, more generally speaking, if the "Jury paradox" is an argument strong enough to refute the second definition of *epistēmē*, why does Plato choose to consecrate almost twelve Stephanus pages to a long discussion which not only is unable to clarify how false belief is possible, but is also worthless in refuting the second definition of knowledge? If this long discussion is not a refutation of the second definition proposed by Theaetetus, why is Plato so interested in it? I suggest that, in order to address these questions, the double hunting described in the Aviary must be interpreted in a different way than the one proposed by Socrates.

3 Adalier's Reading of the Aviary Model

Before expressing my own proposal, I find helpful to focus the attention on Adalier's reading of the Aviary soul model. Adalier rightly observes that the Wax Block and the Aviary are not Plato's models in the sense that «they are models which are actually subscribed to by him».[12] The discussion of these models as solutions to the problem of false belief does not reflect Plato's own original efforts to come to grips with this problem. Adalier suggests the idea «that the discussion may be dialectical in nature» and intends to reflect Plato's «engagement with, and responses to, certain views that are not his own, which would open up the possibility that in the discussion Plato is not revealing his own difficulties but raising ones for the views of others».[13] According to Adalier, the failure of the Aviary, as well as the one of the Wax Block, points out the failure of the materialistic ontology that underpins the Theaetetus definition of knowledge as true opinion: «Plato's ontological provision for Theaetetus definition is essentially a world of radical material individuals, individuals devoid of property possession and of relations, with the corresponding judgements about them being those of identification, or naming, of these individuals».[14] The materialistic nature of these models of the soul is the reason why problems stem from them: «the central problem faced in the Wax Block and the Aviary arises, in Plato's view, as a result of ignoring participation in the Forms, a neglect inherent in the materialistic ontology at work».[15] Adalier thinks that Plato would tackle the impasse at the end of the Aviary by introducing the

12 ADALIER (2001), p. 15.
13 ADALIER (2001), p. 15.
14 ADALIER (2001), p. 21.
15 ADALIER (2001), p. 21.

Forms into the discussion: the Forms, and the Platonic notion of part-whole relationship linked to them, would provide the theoretical and ontological items to solve the riddle of false opinion. By showing the failure in explaining the existence of false belief of the Block and the Aviary with their materialistic ontology, which consists solely of perceptibles and thoughts (imprints) and lacks any room for intelligible entities, the *Theaetetus* offers an indirect recommendation of the Forms.[16] Theaetetus and Socrates commit two mistakes about the number: the young mathematician takes the number of things perceived to be the same thing as the perceived things themselves, while Socrates takes the knowledge or thought of the numbers to be the same as the numbers themselves. They commit these fouls because they adopt the restricted materialistic ontology inherent in the two soul-models: Theaetetus and Socrates place the numbers in one of the two ontological categories available in the Wax Block and in the Aviary (perceptibles and thoughts/imprints). But these are the wrong categories to put the numbers in, because the numbers belong for Plato to the realm of Forms. As Adalier writes: «on Plato analysis, 5 and 7 are parts that make up the whole that is 12, and parts are different from the whole of which they are parts because they participate in different Forms from the one that the whole participates in, the part-whole structure being thus constituted».[17] So, the materialist, by neglecting the Forms, misinterprets the part-whole structure of things because he reduces wholes to the mere sum of parts. An instance of such misinterpretation is taking numbers as a mere plurality of units, a view according to which 12 is identical to 5 and 7. The correct use of the parts-whole relationship, added to the distinction between possessing and having knowledge, would offer a valuable way to explain the occurrence of false belief. In 198e7–199a2, in fact, Socrates claims that the distinction between possessing and having knowledge is able to overcome the paradox of the perfect mathematician or the perfect grammarian, who knows every number (letter) but, when he starts counting (writing), treats the result (words) and the numbers (letters) as if he did not know them. But the distinction between the two kinds of knowledge can solve this paradox only if it is admitted that the knowledge of the parts, letters or numbers (addends), is not the same as the knowledge of a word or of a number as a whole: the collection of its parts

16 As ADALIER (2001), pp. 3–4 openly recognizes he put himself on the hermeneutical reading of the dialogue inaugurated by Cornford. According to him the *Theaetetus* must be only an indirect confirmation of *Republic* and *Phaedo*, and specifically of those passages that claim that the only knowledge is knowledge of Forms. As CORNFORD (1935), p. 163 wrote, «the *Theaetetus* leads to this old conclusion by demonstrating the failure of all attempts to extract knowledge from sensible objects».

17 ADALIER (2001), p. 36.

is a way to describe a whole, but is not identical to its perfect knowledge.[18] As it is known, however, Socrates does not take this path because in the materialist ontology of the Aviary model the knowledge of the parts coincides with the knowledge of the whole, and the identification of the two makes the distinction between having and possessing knowledge useless. In addition, this is also what leads this model to failure: if, as happens in the Aviary account, the whole is merely the sum of its parts and knowing the whole is equal to knowing its parts, there is no room for the existence of false belief.

4 Some Remarks on Adalier's Reading of the Aviary

While I do share some points of Adalier's reading, I happen to not share some others, but I think it is still useful to reflect upon his proposal.

First, I agree with the idea that in some ways Plato, in his criticism of the Aviary, hints indirectly at the part-whole relationship as a good analogy to make an indirect allusion to the Forms. In a previous study I tried to provide a metaphysical reading of the part-whole relationship in the so-called Dream Theory, according to which the wholes play the role of Forms and the parts the role of the qualitative items (or *poiotēta*), which belong to the Form but are not identical to it.[19] On the ground of this metaphysical reading I have shown that, in the holistic system proposed by Plato in the Dream Theory, while the *logos* is able to acquire some information and some relations among the items that compose the holistic structure (the Form) it has to know, yet it cannot attain complete knowledge of the structure (*ousia*) as a whole. The rationale adumbrated by Adalier as a solution for the Aviary failure seems to me similar to the one at work in Socrates' version of the Dream theory; just as the number twelve is in itself a whole that is something other than the mere sum of its parts (5 and 7 or 4 and 8), so the Form is a whole that is something more complete that the addition of its *poiotēta* or parts: "pleasant through sight and hearing" is a part of the Beautiful but is not identical to Forms of Beauty, because Beauty as

18 I argued for a similar thesis in MAFFI (2014), pp. 210–211. In *Metaph.* V, 1020 b 6–7 Aristotle says that the *ousia* of a thing is what it is once, «as for instance what six is, not two or three times, but once; for six is once six». Therefore the *ousia* of twelve, or twelve as a whole, is what twelve is once. This means that mathematical operations like "7 + 5" or "8 + 4" are not identical with twelve as a *holon*, but they are parts of the whole and, consequently, they are ways of describing a whole (twelve) that is not in itself the mere sum of its parts. By analogy, if the *ousia* of a Form (a Form as a whole) is something more than the sum of its *poiotēta*, then the knowledge of a Form is not identical with the knowledge of its parts.

19 See MAFFI (2007), pp. 11–21, and MAFFI (2014), pp. 259–278.

a *holon* (like the wagon in *Theaet.* 207b8–c4) cannot be reduced to the simple addition of its parts. This means that knowing the parts of the wagon is not the same as knowing the *ousia* of wagon (Form) or the wagon (Form) as a whole.

Moreover, we can find some references to the Forms also in the previous parts of the dialogue. There are at least two passages of the *Theaetetus* which seem to make clear hints to the Forms, or introduce items that play the role of the Forms.

The first occurrence concerns the so-called Digression (172c1–177b8) on the philosopher's way of life: here Plato uses phrases like *an monon tychōsi tou ontos* (172 d9: «provided only they get at what is»), *ti de pot'estin anthrōpos* (174b3: «what man himself is») and *autēs dikaiosynēs te kai adikias* (175c2: «of justice and injustice themselves»). Like Chappell, who rightly recognizes that «no one disputes that these phrases are part of the Middle-Period language for Forms»,[20] I firmly believe, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, that such allusions are in themselves hints to the Forms, because of the close similarity between the *Theaetetus* Digression and two passages, respectively in the *Phaedo* (69a 6–c2) and in the *Republic* (500b9–d2).[21] Given that no one disputes that in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* passages Plato is indeed referring to the Forms, it seems to me very plausible for him to be intentionally referring to the Forms also in the Digression.

The second hint to the Forms can be found in a passage placed into the final refutation of the first definition of *epistēmē* (183c3–187a 9). At *Theaet.* 186a, Plato makes a list of *koina*, items common to all perceptions and perceived only by the soul in itself. Among the scholars of this dialogue there is an ongoing discussion about the ontological status of the *koina*, but, as I have tried to demonstrate in my previous work, I believe it is hard to give them an ontological status other than that of the Platonic Forms, because in *Theaetetus* they play the same role that the Forms play in the *Phaedo*: they mark the passage from perceptual knowledge to intellectual knowledge.[22]

So, I agree with Adalier's idea that some hints or allusion to the Forms can be found in this dialogue (and in the Aviary passage), in particular we can find concepts, metaphors or models which can replace the role and the functions of the Forms. And I also agree with him when he says that the Wax Block and the Aviary are not Plato's own explanations of the false belief and that, even if Plato is indeed the creator of these metaphors of the soul, he merely assigns them a dialectical function. However, my disagreement with Adalier's proposal

20 CHAPPELL (2004), p. 127.

21 See MAFFI (2019), pp. 147–155.

22 See MAFFI (2014), pp. 171–176.

concerns the reason Plato would make such indirect allusions to Forms, and the purpose for the dialectical function of the two models. Adalier claims that the pages about the failure in explaining the false opinion offer a glimpse of the general meaning of the *Theaetetus*. Since the cause of the collapse of the Aviary is the neglect of Forms, the *Theaetetus* would serve as an indirect recommendation of the theory of Forms: without the introduction of Forms it proves impossible not only to explain how the false belief occurs, but also to find a correct definition to describe what kind of phenomenon knowledge is.[23] Furthermore, the collapse of the Wax Block and of the Aviary shows the impossibility of a materialistic account of knowledge and its object: the materialistic ontology of these two models engenders difficulties which are not solvable within the boundaries marked by the models themselves. So the target of the dialectical discussion about the false would be the materialist account of knowledge.[24]

I believe, like Adalier, that there are many items in the dialogue than can be read as hints to Forms and, consequently, I also think that Plato, when he writes the *Theaetetus*, is far from displaying dissatisfaction with the Forms and is still adhering to the Two World Theory. But all this does not lead to conclude that the introduction of the Forms would solve the problem of the nature of human knowledge in the *Theaetetus*. I argue instead that Plato's allusions to Forms may be interpreted at the opposite: through these hints to the Forms Plato warns the readers that not even the introduction of Forms can offer the solution to the problem of the nature of *epistēmē*.[25] If Plato has at his disposal the factor (Forms) which can provide the correct response to the question 'what is knowledge', why does he not explicitly use it? Adalier's (and Cornford's) thesis is that Plato in *Theaetetus* intends to show the impossibility of attaining knowledge of the sensible world without evoking the intelligible world. However, to accomplish this task the first part of the dialogue would be enough. And two questions remain: what do the other two parts of the dialogue mean? Is a long and complex dialogue like the *Theaetetus* really only an indirect confirmation of doctrines we have already learned from other dialogues? For instance, we already know from the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* that the world of appearance has not in itself its *raison d'être* and that material causes are not the real causes of the sensible world. My hypothesis is that

23 ADALIER (2001), pp. 34–36.

24 An interesting defense of the thesis that the dialectical target of the *Theaetetus* is a materialistic ontology strongly linked to an empiricist epistemology is offered by CHAPPELL (2004). For a discussion of Chappell's proposal I refer to MAFFI (2006), pp. 459–465.

25 About how the introduction of the Forms is unable to solve the riddle of the *Theaetetus* see also TRABATTONI (2018), pp. VII–XXII.

the *Theaetetus* contributes something new to Plato's philosophy, but this new piece of doctrine does not consist, by refuting the Forms, in a theoretical rupture with the onto-epistemological horizon sketched in the middle-period dialogues, because the novelty introduced in the *Theaetetus* presupposes this horizon. By placing in some relevant passages of the dialogue items that can be read as hints of Forms (because they play a role very similar to the one played by the Forms themselves), Plato aims to highlight that with the *Theaetetus* we are still in the onto-epistemological landscape outlined in his middle-period dialogues. In this way, it is possible to see that the new epistemological ideas that Plato introduces in the second and the third parts of the *Theaetetus* must also be included in the onto-epistemological horizon sketched in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. The outstanding novelty of the *Theaetetus* is that, once these ideas are inserted into this horizon, they inexorably modify it and, consequently, Plato's theory of knowledge as well.

I will display in the last paragraph of the present work what in my opinion the novelty of the *Theaetetus* consists in; but first I have to deal briefly with my second point of disagreement with Adalier's reading.

It may be true that the Wax Block and the Aviary are models through which Plato attacks the materialistic and empiricist approach to the problem of knowledge. I argue, though, that the dialectical function of these models points our attention towards something else; that is, that there is another possible way to read the image of the two kinds of hunts. I would suggest that the distinction between possessing and having knowledge, with its corresponding double type of hunting depicted in the Aviary, aims at calling the careful reader's attention back to the doctrine of Recollection exposed in the *Meno*. My hypothesis is that the problems and some features of the Aviary-soul model have the dialectical task to link the Aviary passage with the doctrine of Recollection in the *Meno*. One of the merits of Adalier's interpretative hypothesis lies in the fact that it makes it plausible to read the Wax Block and the Aviary metaphors in a dialectical way, namely as means that point the attention towards other Platonic tenets not explicitly exposed (but presupposed) in the *Theaetetus*. This has the merit of being compatible with what Plato wrote elsewhere about the soul activity in knowing something. But Adalier is not the only scholar to suggest a dialectical reading of this dialogue. David Sedley proposes «an interpretation of the dialogue according to which Socrates […] although not himself a Platonist, was, so to speak, the midwife of Platonism».[26] By developing this implicit portrayal of Socrates as the 'midwife of Platonism', Plato «aims to demonstrate, if not the identity, at any rate the profound continuity, between,

26 SEDLEY (2004), p. 8.

on the one hand, his revered master's historic contribution and, on the other, the Platonist truth».[27] Consequently, seasoned readers of Plato can see the platonic subtext lying hidden under the Socratic text. The platonically informed readers can appreciate in the *Theaetetus* all the Socratic insights which paved the way to Plato's mature thought. This 'external midwifery', that, according to Sedley, Plato has «practiced on us the readers», implies that the dialogue must be interpreted as a text full of allusions to the other dialogues of Plato, and therefore as a text that structurally needs to be read in continuity with the dialogues of the middle period. Despite my disagreement with the general meaning of Sedley's reading of the *Theaetetus*, I think that this stands also in the case of the Aviary soul-model: to read it in the light of another main tenet of Platonic thought may be very useful to provide a plausible hermeneutical hypothesis of the function of the Aviary metaphor. To synthesize: I agree with Adalier that the metaphors of the Wax block and of the Aviary are not the best tools for Plato to solve the riddle of false opinion, and therefore like him I believe that the two metaphors have a dialectical function. However, I affirm that Plato's dialectical intent is not limited to a critique of the materialistic account of knowledge. Rather, it seems to me that Plato's dialectical intent is to help the reader realize that behind the model of the Aviary one can see the shadow of the *Meno* and its doctrine of Recollection, which constitutes a plausible solution to the issues that underlie the model of the Aviary.

In the next two paragraphs I will try to ground this hypothesis in order to justify the parallelism between the Aviary passage and the *Recollection* in the *Meno*.

5 Arguments Supporting a Parallelism between the *Theaetetus* and the *Meno*

In his study on *Theaetetus* McDowell proposes to read the Aviary as an implicit critique of the doctrine of Recollection. He compares the puzzle of 198a4–c10 to the eristic paradox of *Meno* 80d–e («If you already know what virtue is, you don't need to look for it; if you don't already know, you won't know when you have found it»). In the *Meno* this paradox is solved by invoking the theory of Recollection. So, McDowell finds that there is a «parallelism» between on one hand the *Meno*'s puzzle and its solution, and on the other the 198a4–c10 puzzle and its solution found in the Aviary distinction between possessing knowledge and having it. While I agree with McDowell when he suggests that there is a

27 *Ibidem*.

parallelism between the *Meno*'s puzzle and the *Theaetetus*' 198a4–c10, I have to disagree when he affirms that its aim is to suggest the criticism of the Aviary is implicitly also a criticism to the use of the Theory of Recollection to work out the *Meno* puzzle.[28] I think that Plato's aim here is quite the opposite: the parallelism points out that the absence in the *Theaetetus* of a doctrine like the Recollection is the reason why it seems impossible to find an explanation of how the false belief occurs. The Recollection satisfies the compulsory requirement which makes the existence of false opinion explicable: I can know and, at the same time, not know the object X.[29] Let's suppose, according to the Recollection, that when my soul was in hyperuranion, it saw the Form of Beauty and then, upon entering the body, my soul forgot the most part of the Form's content, retaining only some traces of the Form. This body of traces constitutes my partial knowledge of Beauty, by virtue of which I can affirm that Beauty is "pleasant through sight and hearing". Based on this partial knowledge I can rightly say that a Beethoven symphony is beautiful, but I can also wrongly say that a good action is not beautiful because my soul has forgotten the moral value of the Form of Beauty and has not yet recollected it. In this way the existence of false belief finds its explanation.

If this were the case, another question would rise to our attention: why did Plato decide not to use the theory of Recollection as means to solve his riddle, but instead limits himself only to concealing this theory behind the collapse of the Aviary model? An answer to this question is needed in order to address the following objection: if Plato wanted to explain knowledge and false belief through the Recollection, he could have done so. But, since he did not, it must be concluded that it is useless to read the *Theaetetus* within the network of other platonic dialogues because it is a dialogue already complete in itself. As a first partial response it must be said that, as shown above, the *Theaetetus* invites the scholars to interpret it in relation with other dialogues: by means of images, metaphors and concepts there are in it hints and allusions to some important platonic tenets. It is not unsound to assume that Plato deliberately intends to hint or allude to some of his philosophical ideas without evoking them directly because he deems enough to call them back to his readers in the form of a suitable reminder such as an image, a simile, or a brief excursus; and

28 MCDOWELL (1973), pp. 221–223.

29 This is exactly the possibility that Theaetetus does not dare to choose at 196 c7–d4. The false opinion remains without explanation until it is admitted that there is a way according to which "it is possible for someone to be ignorant of the very things he knows" (196 c7–8). The Recollection is the explanation of such way.

a good reminder must contain only such items that make the reader able to recall what Plato wants him to remember.

Before completing the answer to this question, I will have to provide additional information about the aforementioned parallelism.

This parallelism is not so obvious *prima facie*, because in 197e2–3 Socrates states that «[...] when we are children, this enclosure [*scil.* the mental aviary] is empty». According to some scholars, this detail is strong enough to close off any attempt to read the theory of Recollection into the Aviary.[30]

McDowell limits himself to asserting that this difference does not damage the parallelism he alleges; but Chappell notices that «he does not say why he thinks the difference unimportant nor does he explain why Plato might have added this difference».[31] Socrates' statement is a very inept addition if we intend to read the puzzle of 198a4–c10 as a parallel of the paradox of *Meno* 80d–e.

To smooth this inept addition Sedley attributes to the historical Socrates the idea that our aviaries are empty in infancy, because the historical Socrates cannot have held the theory that learning is recollection. But, even if we cannot properly speak of Recollection, in the passage 198d4–8 we can find some allusions to the mature Platonic doctrine of the anamnesis and to the thesis supported in the *Meno* that "all learning is recollection".[32]

Despite the historical Socrates' denial of our innate knowledge, the reader who knows Plato's philosophy will appreciate that the Socratic description of learning in the Aviary has some important items which pave the way to the Platonic theory of Recollection.

As already stated earlier, I disagree with Sedley's hermeneutical reading of the dialogue because I think it simplistic to lay the blame of the aporetical conclusion of the *Theaetetus* on the historical Socrates, but this is not the appropriate place for a general and critical discussion of Sedley's whole interpretation of the *Theaetetus*. Here I shall merely offer an explanation for this inept addition that doesn't require a multi-level (Socratic-Platonic) reading of the entire dialogue.

Trying to throw light on the Platonic addition of 197e2–3 we can imagine that the child's empty soul status is the same as the one the *Meno* slave finds himself in when Socrates starts to interrogate him about a problem of geometry.

What is the epistemic status of the slave during the whole anamnestic experiment? Meno introduces his slave as someone who is completely ignorant in

---

30 CORNFORD (1935), p. 136; BOSTOCK (1988), pp. 190–191; and CHAPPELL (2004), pp. 190–192.

31 CHAPPELL (2004), p. 192.

32 See SEDLEY (2004), pp. 29–30.

geometry – in the Aviary vocabulary, as someone whose aviary/soul is empty concerning geometry, because, having never studied geometry, he doesn't possess any geometrical birds in his cage. Regarding the knowledge of geometry, the slave is in a state of soul-emptiness, as it has been remarked by Socrates in 85c1 when he says that at the beginning of the experiment the slave doesn't possess any knowledge in geometry; but this is the same situation in which a child may be found when he starts learning the contents of geometry. Not by chance, in the immediately following line Socrates equates the birds with the contents of knowledge (in this case the already-formalized contents of arithmetic). This means that Plato here is talking about a standard situation that someone who starts learning a subject like geometry or arithmetic may find himself in. It is important to keep in mind the context in which Socrates is speaking: he is using a metaphor to clarify a certain phenomenon, namely how false belief occurs in the soul. He has just asked Theaetetus the effort to imagine the soul which possesses *epistēmē* as an aviary full of birds/knowledge. So, in order to encourage Theaetetus to a better understanding of the metaphor, Socrates describes the soul starting the process of learning a field of knowledge like geometry as a place empty of contents of geometry, namely as a soul which ignores the formalized contents of geometry (axioms, theorems …). If it is plausible to read the emptiness of the child soul as emptiness of the contents of geometry, this implies that the child soul is not necessarily empty *in absolutum*. From the Aviary metaphor we can not take out valuable factors to determine whether the soul is absolutely empty or not; all we can say is that in the Aviary the soul is 'empty' in the sense that it lacks any formalized contents of geometry: the focus of the Aviary is not, in fact, on describing the process of learning but on pointing out how false belief may occur in the human soul. I think therefore that there is no need to overload the statement in 197e2–3 with a metaphysical meaning so strong to rule out the parallelism between the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus*: the child soul in the Aviary is empty of the contents/birds of geometry in the same way as the slave soul in the maieutic experiment in the *Meno* is empty of the contents of geometry.

However, in the *Meno*, as Ferrari rightly recognizes, despite the slave being introduced by Meno as completely ignorant in geometry, «non si può veramente sostenere che egli si presenti a Socrate completamente privo di sapere, come una *tabula rasa*».[33] Along the whole anamnestic experiment the slave reveals himself as able not only to understand the question posed to him by Socrates but also to make some logical connections: «si direbbe anzi – as Ferrari writes – che il nucleo dell'esperimento anamnestico consista esattamente

33 FERRARI (2017), p. 350.

nella soluzione di un problema effettuata per mezzo dell'attivazione delle disposizioni logico-razionali dello schiavo, ossia della sua capacità di stabilire nessi, vagliare opzioni, operare scelte a partire da determinati contenuti».[34]

Therefore, the fact that the soul is empty of the contents of a particular knowledge when the child begins his learning process does not mean that the soul is *absolutely* empty, because it possesses an innate, natural and logical endowment which is independent from the kind of education one may have received. The child in his aviary must possess the very same innate, natural and logical endowment that the slave possess in the maieutical experiment in the *Meno*, otherwise he would never be able to fill his empty soul with contents of geometry. The status of the slave in the *Meno* is therefore largely comparable with the one of the child who starts his learning process in the Aviary simile: even more so if we consider the fact that the slave, as well as the child, is just starting his process of learning. With the statement at 197e2–3 Socrates does not intend to rule out the basis of the anamnesis theory: to do so he would have needed a lot more philosophical arguments than a quick remark at the beginning of the description of the soul as an Aviary. With the statement at 197e2–3 Plato simply suggests that the child soul is empty of the specific and already-formalized contents of the geometry. This is also confirmed by the fact that the metaphor of the Aviary is introduced by Socrates to explain the error at the level of the exchange of thoughts; and this case is immediately represented by a mathematical example. The context itself therefore seems to suggest that the emptiness of the aviary concerns only the contents of the knowledge to be learned. If this is the case, then what Socrates said in 197e2 does not make the Aviary soul model incompatible with the condition of the slave in the *Meno*: in both cases the child and the slave learn something they do not know (the formalized contents of geometry) because their souls are empty of bits of geometry but are not empty *in absolutum*; their souls possess some innate *a priori* laws and universal notions which are a necessary requirement for learning any form of knowledge.

If my argument is plausible, then the objection against the parallelism between the *Meno* anamnesis and the Aviary is overcome.[35] On the contrary,

34 FERRARI (2017), p. 350.

35 There is another way to overcome the objection and it is expressed by BRISSON (2008), p. 53: the thesis that our aviary of knowledge-birds is empty in infancy is a thesis included in the Aviary-model explanation of false belief; if the Aviary model is to be rejected, so also the thesis that our aviary of knowledge birds is empty in infancy is to be rejected. Brisson's aim is proving that the midwifery in the *Theaetetus* is compatible with the metaphysical background (including the doctrine of the Recollection) of the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*. For this reason he intends to show that the soul cannot be completely

the similarity between the condition of the soul of the *Meno* slave and the condition of the child's soul in the Aviary confirms the closeness between the two dialogues.

6 Further Arguments in Favor of the Parallelism between *Theaetetus* and *Meno*

There is something else that makes this parallelism plausible. Besides the allusions, already noted by McDowell, of *Theaetetus* 198a4–c10 to the Meno paradox of inquiry, there are other hints to the *Meno* doctrine of Recollection. To escape the paradox of the perfect mathematician who knows every number but, when he starts counting, treats the result and the numbers as if he didn't know them, Socrates describes the Aviary model (198d4–8) with the following words:

> Just likewise, it may be a long time since a man came to learn a piece of knowledge, and first knew it. It's still possible for him to renew his knowledge (*katamanthanein*) of those same pieces of knowledge, each of which he came to possess long before (*analambanonta ten epistēmēn*), but did not have to hold in his thought. He can do it by laying his hands once more on the knowledge of each thing, and holding it tight.
>
> *Theaet.* 198d4–8

Here a consistent echo of the *Meno* is immediately recognizable. As appropriately highlighted by Sedley, there are two noteworthy items: 1) Socrates uses the word *katamanthanein* with the meaning of «renewing the knowledge»; 2) the Greek phrase for «recovering the knowledge» is *analambanein ten epistēmēn* but this is the identical expression that it is twice used in the *Meno* (85d3–8) for "Recollection".[36] It is hard to believe that in using this phrase Plato was completely unaware of the link he was building between *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. Moreover, if we consider that the initial situation of the child in the Aviary is similar to that of the slave boy in the *Meno*, and that the puzzle of the perfect arithmetician leaves his process of inquiry unexplained in the same way the *Meno* eristic argument does, it is difficult to deny that Plato makes us

---

and absolutely empty. I agree with that idea and, for this reason, I argue that the child soul is empty of the formalized contents of a science but is not empty in *absolutum*.

36 SEDLEY (2004), p. 30.

aware that the anamnesis theory of the *Meno* lies behind the Aviary model. At least, within this framework, nothing prevents us from providing a reading of the two epistemic conditions stated in the Aviary in the light of the doctrine of Recollection. The Aviary, being a metaphor of the condition of the soul when it knows or doesn't know something (and then when it has or hasn't true and false belief), may be open to different levels of interpretation.

After this long detour it is finally the moment to offer my reading of the double hunting described in the Aviary. If the status of the child in the Aviary may be equated to the one of the slave in the *Meno*, thus the double hunting – the first one to acquire and then possess knowledge and the second to hold the knowledge we have already possessed – may be compared to the two forms of knowing involved in the Recollection theory. And the link with the Recollection is justified by the parallelism between the status of the child in the Aviary and the one of the slave in the *Meno*.

Thus, in the light of the Recollection, we can compare the possessing (*ktêsis*) of knowledge to the knowledge that the soul has acquired when existing in the world of Forms before her embodiment: as can be gathered from the passage 197e2–6, the possessing (*ktêsis*) of knowledge occurs when a person acquires pieces of knowledge and shuts them up in their cage/soul: in this way we can affirm that «they have learned or discovered whatever it is that the knowledge itself is about, and that this is what knowledge is» (197e5–6). Consequently, the true meaning of the action of knowing (*to epistasthai*) something is for Socrates to capture the knowledge and lock it up in the cage of one's soul; namely, for Socrates *to epistasthai* means to possess knowledge. This is true also in other Platonic dialogues as, for instance, the *Phaedo*: in *Phaedo* 66 d–e Plato not only affirms that the real *epistēmē*/*sophia* consists in a perfect and complete grasp of the Forms performed by the eyes of the mind, but also claims that this status of *theōria* can be reached by the soul when it is disconnected and detaches from the body (*Phaedo* 67a). Consequently, also in the *Phaedo to epistasthai* means to possess in the soul/aviary every bird/Form because we have learnt them, in this case, by grasping their noetic content.

If the possessing (*ktêsis*) of knowledge can be equated to the knowledge that the soul has acquired in its prenatal status, then we can compare the holding (*hexis*) of knowledge to the knowledge that the humans, in their lifetime, have at their disposal: this kind of knowledge consists in the soul's effort, through the dialectic method, to re-seize the birds that it had previously acquired. In this perspective, the *hexis* of knowledge may be read as something similar to the *deuteros ploûs* metaphor in the *Phaedo*, according to which the human beings try to know the Forms not directly, by grasping them through a mental

insight, but through the practice of *logos* in the dialectical method.[37] To further the parallelism established here with the *Meno*, it is possible to compare the *hexis* of knowledge presented in the Aviary with the dialectical exercise carried out by the slave of Meno to solve the geometry problem that has been assigned to him.

As we know, Socrates rejects this option because he understands the *hexis* of knowledge not as a knowledge in progress – and therefore as partial and susceptible to errors – but as a full knowledge, as complete as the *ktêsis* of knowledge. As seen earlier, this is the reason why the Aviary model as an explanation of false belief is doomed to fail: if the *hexis* is a kind of knowledge as exhaustive as the *ktêsis* kind, there is no room for false beliefs in the interchange of items of knowledge, even if it were an interchange between an item of the *hexis* and an item of the *ktêsis* of knowledge. Behind the failure of the Aviary in explaining the existence of false opinion, the seasoned reader of Plato's dialogues can easily find another interpretation for the two kinds of hunting by reading them as the two kinds of knowledge involved in the Recollection. I argue that this is how Plato invites his readers of the *Theaetetus* not to forget what was said in the *Meno* concerning the nature of human knowledge, and what condition makes this knowledge possible.[38]

But if this is true, why does Plato seem to allude to some important tenets of the *Meno* but decides not to use them in the *Theaetetus*? This may sound strange: why doesn't Plato mention the Recollection doctrine in a dialogue where not only has he already separated the possessing of knowledge from

---

37 For a detailed analysis of the meaning of the *Phaedo* in Plato's philosophy I refer to some important works by TRABATTONI: see, for instance TRABATTONI (2020), pp. 65–68 and TRABATTONI (2012), pp. LXVIII–LXXII. On the metaphor of the second voyage see also MARTINELLI TEMPESTA (2003), pp. 104–121. In brief, I shall summarize the content of the *Phaedo* as follows: true *epistēmē* cannot be attained until the soul has left the body, because the body is an insurmountable obstacle against attaining complete *sophia*: as long as we have a body we have *philo-sophia*, the only kind of knowledge and purification possible for the human being. We know that philosophy is the second best method for knowledge thanks to both the metaphor of the second voyage (99d2) and the simile that describes the *logos* as a raft we embark on to cross the sea of life. These images recall the fact that philosophy is an indirect kind of *epistēmē* because it can provide the best and least refutable of humane doctrines, but it cannot attain the absolute certainty that could instead be provided by a divine doctrine or by a direct vision of the Forms such as the soul had in its prenatal existence.

38 For a reading of the Recollection not as a method of knowledge, but as the only doctrine able to provide the metaphysical ground for human beings to learn, search, have false opinions and know anything see TRABATTONI (2020), pp. 137–143. I also argued for this kind of reading in MAFFI (2014), pp. 266–270.

the holding of knowledge, but also described the *katamanthanein* in terms of recovering the knowledge? Also, why doesn't Plato introduce the theory of anamnesis, a theory that is able to explain the occurrence of false belief, in a context where the topic discussed is precisely the occurrence of false opinion? It seems to me that in the *Theaetetus* Plato intends to remain a step behind the *Meno*. In the next paragraph I will clarify the meaning of the phrase "to remain a step behind the *Meno*" and I will explain my hypothesis about the reason Plato chooses to do so.

7 The Positive Contribution of the Aviary in the *Theaetetus*

It is obvious that Plato's silence about Recollection cannot be ascribed to the theory not having been elaborated at the time *Theaetetus* was composed: it's certain that the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* were written before the *Theaetetus*. Therefore, I believe that the absence of the Recollection in a context so rich of references as the Aviary must be read as intentional, and purposeful. It may be useful here to recall the four main references to the *Meno* found in the Aviary: 1) the strong similarity between the initial situation of the soul of the child in the Aviary and that of the soul of the slave boy in the *Meno*; 2) the fact, noted by McDowell, that the puzzle of the perfect arithmetician leaves his process of inquiry unexplained in the same way the *Meno* eristic argument does. It's noteworthy here that at 198e3–4 Socrates poses this question: «Should we say that in a case like this, the mathematician or the literate sets himself to learn from himself what he knows, even though he knows it already?», and this is exactly the issue the Recollection in the *Meno* offers a solution to; 3) in *Theaetetus* 198 d4–8 Socrates uses the Greek phrase *analambanein ten epistēmēn* for «recovering the knowledge» and this is the identical expression that is twice used in the *Meno* (85d3–8) for «recollection»; 4) the possibility to read the two kinds of hunting in the Aviary (the κτῆσις and the ἕξις of knowledge) as the two kinds of knowledge involved in the Recollection.

I argue that through these hints Plato's purpose is to make his readers able to realize that the doctrine of Recollection of the *Meno* lies behind the Aviary as its dialectical fulfilment, because the Recollection seems to be the possible solutions to the difficulties arisen in the Aviary; as Franco Trabattoni rightly observes, the Recollection is the Stone guest hovering behind the Aviary model and the Jury Paradox.[39] In this sense I argued that Plato puts the *Theaetetus* a step behind the *Meno*, because the *Theaetetus* is only a step away from the

39 See TRABATTONI (2018), pp. CXXII–CXXIV.

solution but Plato deliberately avoids taking this step. Why does Plato choose to do so? My hypothesis is obviously not that Plato no longer believes in philosophical tenets such as the Recollection or the Forms. My hypothesis is that Plato wants his readers not to forget that those tenets are still active and that what will be said in the continuation of the dialogue must be understood within the onto-epistemic framework those tenets take shape in.

The clear references to the Recollection, therefore, may be interpreted as signals Plato sends out in order to throw the *Theaetetus* in the onto-epistemological landscape outlined in the *Meno* and, in general, in his middle-period dialogue. I am convinced that the Aviary model also plays a very similar role to the one I assign elsewhere to the Digression about the life of the philosopher (*Theaet*. 172a1–177c4).[40] In a previous work on *Theaetetus* Digression I tried to demonstrate that all the main ideas the Digression displays have already been explained elsewhere: 1) the freedom of the philosopher, as opposed to the slavery of the orator, is a topic of the *Gorgias*; 2) the philosopher's care for the soul rather than the body and the thesis that there is no virtue without wisdom are claimed in the *Phaedo* as well in the *Republic*; 3) that "wisdom" is the knowledge of Forms and that it is a kind of purification and, as far as possible, assimilation to god is argued in the *Phaedo* and in the *Republic*. From these parallelisms the conclusion I feel inclined to draw is that the importance of the Digression consists exactly in the fact that it does not add anything new to Plato's philosophy, and in this way it actually shows that the onto-epistemological background of the *Theaetetus* (in particular the second and the third part of the *Theaetetus*) is the same background of the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. As Plato, through the Digression, states that the epistemological issues of the *Theaetetus* must be located in the onto-epistemological framework of his middle dialogues, so, through the Aviary, he warns his readers that the Jury argument and the third part of the *Theaetetus* must be read in continuity not only with the *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* but also with the *Meno*. All this may clarify why Plato should engage in a long discussion of false belief even if it proves useless not only to refute the second definition of *epistēmē*, but also to explain how false opinion occurs. Through his analysis of the Wax Block and the Aviary soul model, Plato aims not only at criticizing a materialist account of knowledge, but also at linking the remaining part of the *Theaetetus* within the horizon sketched by the Recollection in the *Meno*.

Someone might object that there is no need to detect the theory of Recollection in the background of the Aviary in order to see a link between the *Meno* and the last part of the *Theaetetus*, and that such link is already plainly

40 See MAFFI (2019), pp. 154–158.

stated: the third definition of *epistēmē* offered by Socrates («knowledge is *alēthēs doxa meta logou*») is very close to the famous passage at *Men*. 98a1–4 in which he proposes that the *alēthēs doxa* becomes *epistēmē* when one «binds» it by «calculation (*logismos*) of the cause (*aitia*)».

To this objection I reply as follows: in the next few lines (98a 4–5), Socrates identifies *aitias logismos* with *anamnēsis*. Consequently, the final hypothesis of the *Meno* is that someone can reach the perfect knowledge when the *aitias logismos* has completed the anamnestic procedure: at the end of the process the soul can contemplate, by a noetic insight, the content of the Forms and thus possess the real *epistēmē*.

Why does this definition of knowledge remain a mere hypothesis in the *Meno*? As mentioned earlier, at 98a1–8 Socrates states that knowledge is something more valuable than true belief, and that knowledge differs from true belief because of the binding, which gives the former a stability the latter lacks. But shortly after Socrates says:

> And yet I myself am speaking not as one who knows, but as one who is guessing (*eikazōn*). What I don't think is pure guesswork is that the correct judgement and knowledge are different. If there's anything else that I would claim to know – and there are precious few things of which I would claim that – this is one thing that I would add to the list of those that I know.
>
> *Men*. 98b1–5, transl. SEDLEY 2004, pp. 176–177

What is Socrates guessing? He is neither guessing that knowledge and true belief are two different epistemic states, nor that the binding (*desmos*) is the factor that makes knowledge more stable and therefore more valuable than true belief. What Socrates is guessing is that the binding must coincide with the *aitias logismos*. This is the guesswork that must be verified: whether the *aitias logismos* is really the *desmos* through which the *alēthēs doxa* becomes *epistēmē*.[41] As we know, Socrates considers the *aitias logismos* an adequate

41 It may be objected that the *alla eikazon* at 98b2 can be translated not as «guessing» but as «representing by image» because the verb *eikazo* may also mean "represent by an image". If this were the case, the hypothetical nature of what Socrates says at 98b1–5 would crumble. There are two reasons to choose to translate as «guessing» instead of «representing by an image». In the previous part of the dialogue 89e1–3 there are two occurrences (89 e2–3: *eikazontes* and *eikazoimen*) of the verb *eikazein* that must be correctly translated with "guessing" because, as BENSON (2015), pp. 166–175 showed, the context of this passage is dialectical and hypothetical. This means that *eikazomai* in the sense of "to guess" is already used by Plato in the *Meno* and, consequently, it is plausible that Plato uses this

candidate to transform true belief into knowledge, because he has previously identified it with the *anamnesis*. Once the *logismos* has completed the anamnestic procedure towards the cause, and once this calculation of the real cause is added to true belief, we finally possess knowledge. Unfortunately, a proof to this guesswork is not provided in the *Meno*. My idea is that the proof to this guesswork can be found in the *Theaetetus*.[42]

In the last ten Stephanus pages of the *Theaetetus* (including the final refutation of the second definition of knowledge) Plato will test whether the hypothesis of the *Meno* (that the addition of *aitias logismos* to a true belief can make it into a knowledge) is right or wrong.

In the third part of the dialogue, in fact, Plato proceeds to explain why there is no sense of *logos* that can get human knowledge beyond the boundaries of *doxa*.[43] All the *logos* can do is make the *doxai* better and better, and more informative, but it can't transform them into *epistēmai*. There is no time or space in the present work to explain why and how this is, as I have done elsewhere.[44] In brief, though, in my earlier works on the *Theaetetus* I have shown that in the holistic system proposed by Plato in the third part of the dialogue (the so-called Dream Theory) the *logos* is able to acquire some information and some relations among the items that compose the holistic structure (Form) it has to know, but it cannot attain complete knowledge of the structure as a whole. To do that it would be necessary to achieve a direct kind of knowledge,

---

verb with this same meaning some pages later. The second reason offers an argument for choosing "guessing" over "representing by an image". Those who argue for the latter (see PETRUCCI 2011, pp. 258–259 and FERRARI 2016, p. 288, n. 237) support their claim with the fact that at 97e2–98a1 (few lines before 98b2) Plato uses the image of the statues of Daedalus to introduce the clear difference between *epistēmē* and *alēthēs doxa*. That is true, but I think he does so to clarify the difference between knowledge and true belief, and in particular the *desmos* as what makes knowledge more valuable than true opinion. Socrates, however, is certain of the difference between those two epistemic states, as we know from *Men.* 98b1–5. What Socrates doesn't yet know is the element that plays the role of the *desmos* and for this reason he is speaking not as someone who knows, but as someone who is guessing. So, what Socrates is guessing is that the binding (*desmos*) must coincide with the *aitias logismos*. So, what needs to be verified is whether the *aitias logismos* is really the *desmos* through which the *alethes doxa* becomes *epistēmē*.

42 Recently EL MURR (2013), pp. 166–171, and FERRARI (2016), pp. 84–86 had the merit not only to recognize the similarity between the third definition of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* and the *Meno* passage (98a1–4), but they even argued for the theoretical reasons why the last part of the *Theaetetus* must be read in continuity with the passage of the *Meno*. Despite my reaching a different conclusion from theirs, they offer an important contribution to appreciate the necessity to read the *Theaetetus* in relation with the *Meno*.

43 For a detailed analysis of this point see TRABATTONI (2018), pp. CXXX–CXXXVIII; and MAFFI (2014), pp. 249–278.

44 See MAFFI (2014), ch. IV.

a noetic insight that is impossible for the human *logos* during its earthly life.[45] Therefore, the *Theaetetus* tries to convey the theoretical reasons why philosophical knowledge cannot be a comprehensive and exhaustive knowledge, neither in the form of a direct mental grasp of the Forms performed by the eyes of the mind nor in the form of definitional knowledge achieved by an incessant use of dialectical methods, that should be able to provide complete definitions of Forms.[46] From the failure of the *Theaetetus* we realize that the hypothesis of the *Meno* is wrong: there is no sense of *logos* (included the *aitias logismos*) able to transform the *aletheis doxai* in *epistēmai,* because no meaning of *logos* can restore the same direct vision of Forms the soul had in its disembodied dimension. Through the failure of the last section of the *Theaetetus* we can understand the theoretical grounds explaining why human knowledge is second-hand knowledge, or knowledge insofar as it is possible for a man.

8 Conclusion

To warn the readers that the last section of the *Theaetetus* must be read in continuity with the *Meno* Plato chooses two hints. The first, as we have seen, is the clear resemblance between the third definition of knowledge proposed by Theaetetus and the hypothesis of the *Meno* that there is a factor (the *aitias logismos*) which produces the differences between true opinion and knowledge. The second insight is given through the references to the theory of the Recollection in the *Meno* found in the Aviary model.

Why is it so important to include the *Theaetetus* in the ontological and epistemological landscape of the middle period dialogues included the *Meno*? Because it is essential to really appreciate the contribution of the *Theaetetus* to Plato's epistemology: as argued earlier, we cannot appreciate the novelty introduced by this dialogue in Plato's philosophy if we place the arguments of the *Theaetetus* outside the boundaries sketched in the *Meno*, *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. It should now be explained what this novelty consists in.

Let's start with the second hint that links the *Theaetetus* with the *Meno*: the references to the theory of the Recollection of the *Meno* found in the Aviary model. This hint is not a marginal detail, because it is located in a strategic position. Just after the failure of the Aviary to explain the existence of false belief, Socrates definitively refutes the second definition of *epistēmē* through

45 See MAFFI (2007), pp. 10–21; and MAFFI (2014), pp. 249–259.

46 For this reading of the general meaning of the dialogue I am deeply indebted to TRABATTONI (2020), pp. 164–174; and TRABATTONI (2018), pp. CXXXVIII–CXLVIII.

an argument that is known as the "jury argument" (*Theaet*. 200d5–201c7). With this argument he offers a counter-example to the thesis that knowledge is true belief. A skilled lawyer can lead jurymen to a state of true belief without leading them to a state of knowledge; it is therefore evident that knowledge and true belief are different states. At 201b9–c2 Plato states that the jurymen don't know because they didn't see the crime. Only the eye-witness possesses knowledge, because he saw the crime directly. So the jurymen have a second-hand knowledge, the true belief, while only the eye-witness has the first-hand knowledge, the *epistēmē*. Trabattoni suggested a metaphysical and metaphorical reading of the Jury passage and I have also adopted this reading in my previous works.[47]

Trabattoni compares the condition of the eye-witness who saw the crime directly with the condition of the disembodied soul who grasps the Forms by a noetic insight: in many passages of the dialogues Plato describes the *epistēmē* or *sophia* as a perfect grasping of the Forms effected by the eyes of the mind.[48] If, following Trabattoni's reading of the "jury argument", the condition of the eye-witness is comparable with the condition of the disembodied soul who grasps the Forms, then the condition of the jurors is comparable instead with the one of the humans in their mortal life because they possess a second-hand knowledge, namely, the true judgement (*doxa*): they don't have the mental insight of the Form at their disposal, but they know it, as far as it is possible in the earthly life, through the dialectical method.

According to Trabattoni, therefore, the Jury passage – which rejects the second definition of knowledge – is a metaphor that presupposes the theory of Recollection because it is an indirect way to describe the same situation outlined in the Recollection doctrine.[49]

I think that it is not by chance that Plato placed the Jury passage just immediately after the discussion about the Aviary model. Through references and hints to the doctrine of the anamnesis in the *Meno*, the Aviary metaphor has the form of a suitable reminder which allows readers to recall to their mind the theory of Recollection. This is an essential reminder for two reasons. Firstly, the Aviary offers an argument supporting the metaphorical and metaphysical reading of the Jury passage. It is true that this interpretation of the passage finds its theoretical ground in the theory of Recollection, but we don't necessarily

---

47 See TRABATTONI (2008), pp. 254–270; TRABATTONI (2018), pp. CXXV–CXXVIII and TRABATTONI chapter in this volume; and also MAFFI (2014), pp. 216–222.

48 See, for instance, *Phaedo* 66d–e. However the most clues that the *epistēmē* consists in a direct vision of the Forms are to be found in *Resp*. 476b4–11, 486c4–d2, 500b8–c7, 501b1–7, 519c10, 524c6–8, 536e1.

49 See TRABATTONI (2020), pp. 171–172.

need to go back to *Meno* or *Phaedo* to provide a justification of this reading: we can find it in the *Theaetetus* itself. The Aviary model, which is immediately followed by the Jury, has already warned the readers to keep in mind the theory of Recollection as dialectical fulfilment of the Aviary model, because this doctrine represents what the Aviary lacks to explain the genesis of false belief. An example which marks the continuity between the Jury argument, the Aviary and the Recollection can be provided. In the Jury the eye-witness is not only comparable to the disembodied soul who saw the Forms, but is also the person who, because they saw the crime directly, possesses knowledge or, according the Aviary vocabulary, stored the birds in the cage. In the Aviary, in fact, the possessing (*ktêsis*) of knowledge occurs when a person acquires pieces of knowledge/bird and shuts them up in their cage/soul; but, as I showed earlier, because the possessing (*ktêsis*) of knowledge can be equated to the knowledge that the soul has acquired in its prenatal status as stated in the Recollection, we may conclude that the choice of reading the Jury argument in a metaphorical and metaphysical way in the light of the Recollection finds its validity on the basis of the references to the *Meno* available in the Aviary.[50] According to my hypothesis, the Aviary offers a glimpse of the Recollection so that the careful reader of Plato's dialogues is also invited to interpret the Jury passage in analogy with the Recollection doctrine.

Furthermore, and this is the second reason, if in the Aviary as well as in the Jury passage there are many references or allusions to the *Meno* and to the Recollection, it is not so surprising that the third part of the *Theaetetus* may be read as a discussion of the hypothesis left unverified in the *Meno*: whether or not the addition of a complete *logos* is the factor that can transform the *alēthēs doxa* into *epistēmē*. However, to determine the third part of the *Theaetetus* as a reliable test to check whether the hypothesis left unverified in the *Meno* is correct or not, it is necessary to assume that the main philosophical cores of the middle-period dialogues (the Recollection, the Two-World theory, the second voyage as a dialectical method and the idea that the full knowledge of a Form is its noetic and direct insight) are also valid in the *Theaetetus*. Some scholars rightly claim that we cannot read the *Theaetetus* outside the context

50 It goes without saying that we can apply the same pattern to the condition of the jurors in the court. The jurors are not only comparable with humans in their mortal life because they possess a second-hand knowledge, but they are also comparable to those who try to re-seize the birds that they have previously acquired: in the Aviary this kind of hunting/knowledge is called the *hexis* of knowledge. As in the Aviary the person has to re-catch the knowledge they had previously acquired and stored in their soul/cage, so the in the Recollection the human soul has to recollect the knowledge acquired in its disembodied dimension. Analogously, the jurors in the court try to recompose the scene of the crime through the interrogation of the eyewitnesses.

sketched in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*, but they experience difficulties in finding direct evidence of such context in the dialogue. They also conclude that it can just be implicitly assumed that the context of the middle dialogues is tacitly implied in *Theaetetus*. Ferrari, for instance, correctly claims that we must interpret the Theaetetus in the light of middle-period works, but, because he cannot find hints of them in the text, he argues as follows: if we hope to avoid importing the epistemological framework of the *Theaetetus* from Mars, we must assume that it comes by way of the middle dialogues.[51] Far from being a guess, the onto-epistemological horizon of the middle dialogues is explicitly stated in *Theaetetus* through the Digression, the Aviary and the Jury paradox. And it is vitally important to place the *Theaetetus* in the ontological and epistemological landscape of the middle period dialogues to really appreciate its contribution to Plato's epistemology. What does this contribution consist in? As already stated in the previous paragraph, it is my opinion that the *Theaetetus* tries to convey the theoretical reasons for the impossibility of philosophical knowledge to be a comprehensive and exhaustive knowledge either in the form of a direct mental grasp of the Forms effected by the eyes of the mind or in the form of definitional knowledge, achieved by an incessant use of dialectical methods, able to provide complete definitions of Forms. Therefore, the *Theaetetus* clarifies why, from an epistemological point of view, the knowledge of the philosopher is always accompanied by an expression of prudence and limitation, the same expression of prudence and limitation that follows the attempts to become *sophos* like god in the *Phaedo* (69d) and the *Republic* (500c9–d2). And in this way, as I said earlier, the *Theaetetus* is a refutation of the hypothesis left unverified in the *Meno*.

In conclusion, what I have tried to offer here is a metaphysical and metaphorical reading of the Aviary model in order to show how it plays also a positive role in the dialogue. Even if the Aviary fails to explain the existence of the false, it has the merit of providing key items for a complete reading of the last part of the *Theaetetus*. As a warning signal, the Aviary sends an important message to the Platonic readers: in order to really appreciate the novelty the *Theaetetus* brings to Plato's theory of knowledge, it must be placed into the epistemological framework of the middle dialogues and, in particular, into a strong relation with the definition of knowledge described in *Meno*.[52]

---

51 See FERRARI (2011), p. 140.

52 This means that the *Theaetetus* is not, as some scholars believe – see BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 117–118 and 238–240 – a break with the *Republic* and Plato's middle dialogues, because it should open a third epistemic route that goes beyond the earlier epistemology and ontology sketched in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.

Acknowledgments

The drafting of this paper was carried out as part of the PRIN 2017 project "Racconti di creazione come luoghi di interculturalità dinamica" (Responsabile: Prof.ssa Angela Longo) – Università degli Studi dell'Aquila – Dipartimento di Scienze Umane.

References

ADALIER, G. (2001). The Case of "Theaetetus", *Phronesis*, 46, pp. 1–37.

BENSON, H. (2015). *Clitophon's Challenge. Dialectic in Plato's 'Meno', 'Phaedo' and 'Republic'*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

BOSTOCK, D. (1998). *Plato's 'Theaetetus'*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

BRISSON, L. (2008). Socrates, the Midwife. A key indication for a general interpretation of Plato's "Theaetetus". In: HAVLÍCEK, A.; KARFÍK, F.; SPINKA, S. (eds.). *Plato's* Theaetetus, *Proceedings from the Sixth Symposium Platonicum Pragense*. OIKOUMENH, Praha, pp. 30–54.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The 'Theaetetus' of Plato* (with a translation by Jane Levett). Hackett. Indianapolis-Cambridge.

CHAPPELL, T. (2004). *Reading Plato's 'Theaetetus'*. Sankt Augustin. Academia Verlag.

CHAPPELL, T. (2008). 188 A–C: the Key to the "Theaetetus". In: HAVLÍCEK, A.; KARFÍK, F.; SPINKA, S. (eds.). *Plato's* Theaetetus, *Proceedings from the Sixth Symposium Platonicum Pragense*. OIKOUMENH. Praha, pp. 203–216.

CORNFORD, F.M.D. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London.

EL MURR, D. (2013). Desmos et logos: de l'opinion vrai à la connaissance ('Menon' 97e–98a et 'Théétète' 201c–210b). In: Id. (ed.). *La mesure du savoir. Ètudes sur le* 'Théétète' *de Platon*. Vrin. Paris, pp. 151–171.

FERRARI, F. (2011). *Platone. Teeteto*. BUR. Milano.

FERRARI, F. (2016). *Platone. Menone*. BUR. Milano.

FERRARI, F. (2017). L'esperimento maieutico e la concezione dell'anamnesis nel *Menone* di Platone. In: ADINOLFI, M.; DONÀ, M. (eds.). *Trovarsi accanto. Per gli ottant'anni di Vincenzo Vitiello*. InSchibboleth. Roma, pp. 339–355.

GONZALEZ, F. (2007). Wax Tablet, Aviaries, or Imaginary Pregnancies? On the Power in *Theaetetus*' Soul. *Etudes Platoniciennes*, 4, 2007 (on-line).

MAFFI, E. (2007). *To pan, to holon* e la confutazione della terza definizione di *epistēmē* alcune considerazioni su *Teeteto* 203a1–208b10. *Plato. The Electronic Journal of International Plato Society*, (7), pp. 1–26.

MAFFI, E. (2014). *Lo spazio della filosofia: una lettura del* Teeteto *di Platone*. Loffredo. Napoli.

MAFFI, E. (2019). The *Theaetetus* Digression: an ethical interlude in an epistemological dialogue?. In: BONAZZI, M.; FORCIGNANÒ, F.; ULACCO, A. (eds.). *Thinking, Knowing, Acting: Epistemology and Ethics in Plato and Ancient Platonism*. Brill. Leiden-Boston, pp. 138–159.

MARTINELLI TEMPESTA, S. (2003). Sul significato di *deuteros plous* nel «Fedone» di Platone. In: BONAZZI, M.; TRABATTONI, F. (eds.). *Platone e la tradizione platonica. Studi di filosofia antica*. Cisalpino. Milano, pp. 89–125.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato's Theaetetus*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

PETRUCCI, F. (2011). Opinione corretta, conoscenza, virtù: su '*Menone*' 96d1–98b9. *Elenchos*, 32, pp. 229–262.

POLANSKY, R. (1992). *Philosophy and Knowledge. A commentary on Plato's* Theaetetus. Bucknell University Press. Lewisburg, PA.

ROOCHNIK, D. (2002). Self-Recognition in Plato's "Theaetetus", *Ancient Philosophy*, 22, pp. 37–51.

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism. Text and Subtext in Plato's 'Theaetetus'*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

STERN, PAUL. (2008). *Knowledge and Politics in Plato's* Theaetetus. Cambridge University Press. New York.

TRABATTONI, F. (2008). 'Theaetetus', 200d–201c: Truth without Certainity. In: HAVLÍCEK, A.; KARFÍK, F.; SPINKA, S. (eds.). *Plato's* Theaetetus, *Proceedings from the Sixth Symposium Platonicum Pragense*. OIKOUMENH, Praha, pp. 250–273.

TRABATTONI, F. (2012). *Platone. Fedone*. Einaudi. Torino.

TRABATTONI, F. (2018). *Platone. Teeteto*. Einaudi. Torino.

TRABATTONI, F. (2020). *La filosofia di Platone. Verità e ragione*. Carocci. Roma.

SECTION 5

Belief, Knowledge, Ontology

CHAPTER 11

Two Remarks on False Opinion between Epistemology and Ontology in *Theaetetus* 187b–201c

Francesco Fronterotta

1 Exegetical Assumptions

This is certainly not the place to propose an overall interpretation of such a controversial dialogue as the *Theaetetus*, not even in a general and schematic form. My purpose is much more modest. I would like to make some specific points on the section 187b–201c. In this passage we are faced with some of the numerous problems about the nature of false opinion,[1] the epistemological reasons why it is necessary to account for its origin and the ontological status of its object. In the case of such a complex dialogue, however, these issues are strongly influenced by an understanding of the context where they arise. This is why I shall begin this paper with some preliminary remarks. Within the multiple controversies affecting the interpretation of the *Theaetetus*, I will clarify – albeit in a dogmatic form – the perspective in which I think the dialogue should be situated and the viewpoint I cautiously tend to favor in reading it.

1. The *Theaetetus* is an aporetic, not a dogmatic dialogue. This is made particularly explicit in the concluding words (especially 210b): «All of which our midwife's skill pronounces to be mere wind-eggs and not worth the rearing? – Undoubtedly».[2] In my view, this clear-cut statement, whereby the only positive result of the previous inquiry is the liberation from false opinions about the nature of knowledge, cannot be disproved e.g. by identifying in the discussion of one or more of the three suggested definitions of knowledge a conception of it that is in some way well grounded (I shall return to this issue).

1 I will not discuss in this paper the *vexata quaestio* of the translation of the Greek term δόξα, as "opinion", "belief" or "judgement", which seems to me to be unnecessary for my purpose here. See only, among many studies on this issue, NARCY (2002).

2 I quote the *Theaetetus*, here and below (with modifications), in Cornford's translation: see CORNFORD (1935).

2. The aporetic character of the conclusion of the *Theaetetus* does not commit its author. In a number of dialogues which were certainly written before the *Theaetetus* (most notably the *Republic*, but also the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* and perhaps, albeit in a slightly less evident way, the *Meno*) and in at least two dialogues certainly posterior to the *Theaetetus* (i.e. the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus*), Plato puts forward a strong view of ἐπιστήμη about which he ultimately shows no doubts or hesitations. Of course, this does not mean that it is impossible that Plato wanted to point out in the *Theaetetus* the weaknesses and problems with that conception of knowledge, or even that he was led for whatever reason to call it into question. But it does mean that he never regarded these problems as decisive or unsurmountable, since that conception of knowledge can be found again fully deployed and operational in some later dialogues. The principle whereby each dialogue should be read in an unbiassed way as an autonomous work is surely sound and represents a useful warning against the tendency to interpret Plato's thought in an overly systematic way. Yet it cannot justify the opposite excess, i.e. to consider each dialogue as self-contained, as an expression of views and doctrines wholly independent of one another or even contradictory with respect to one another. This methodological assumption leads me to the following conclusion. If in the *Theaetetus* there appear views or doctrines contrasting with or not corresponding, even *e silentio*, to those normally attested in the other dialogues, then we shall not be allowed to infer that the *Theaetetus* is unique in the Platonic *corpus* and independent of or inconsistent with the other dialogues. Rather, we shall have to ascertain whether there are reasons why Plato may have proposed an aporetic view consciously and programmatically, hence without committing himself to it.[3]

3. As is well known, reference to forms is the main and most evident difference between the conception of ἐπιστήμη in the dialogues written before and after the *Theaetetus* and the aporetic views of ἐπιστήμη discussed in the *Theaetetus*. For Plato, access to forms – no matter whether it occurs in a mediate discursive way or by some form of immediate contact – coincides with full and true knowledge, i.e. science. We shall have to determine whether or not in the *Theaetetus* reference is made to forms, and what are in either case the consequences for the interpretation of the dialogue. On this point I share the view according to which the *Theaetetus* contains no reference to forms.[4] Of course, the supporters of the opposed thesis focus on the celebrated passage about

3 For a discussion of this point see FERRARI (2011), pp. 134–42.

4 The arguments in favor of this view have been synthetically presented and examined by FERRARI (2002), pp. 160–8, and ARONADIO (2016), pp. 173–205.

κοινά (184b–186e), which at least because of their categorial function could be seen as corresponding to the greatest kinds of the *Sophist*. But these scholars are immediately faced with a problem. If forms are present in the *Theaetetus* under the label of κοινά, why does Plato fail to use them to introduce the conception of knowledge that in the other dialogues, both earlier and later than the *Theaetetus*, he successfully describes as consisting precisely in access to forms? Two strategies have been suggested for solving this problem. According to the first, which was defended by Cornford, for reasons I will explain in a moment Plato chooses to refer to the forms only in negative terms, i.e. to refute Protagoras' relativistic sensualism, and avoids drawing any positive conclusion from their existence. According to the second strategy, which has been adopted for example by Casertano, reference to forms, most notably (but not only) in the *Theaetetus*, is a sufficient basis for refuting any type of sensualism yet is only a part of the correct definition of ἐπιστήμη, not a fully-fledged doctrine of knowledge.[5] As I have already said, one may reply that the introduction of forms as objects of thought usually appears to be for Plato a sufficient condition for true knowledge.

4. The absence of any reference to forms in the *Theaetetus* has to be justified in some way. This is perhaps the most significant and celebrated controversy concerning the interpretation of the dialogue. Continental and analytic scholars offer two contrasting explanations for Plato's renunciation of ideas. Roughly speaking, continental interpreters describe Plato as aiming to show that it is impossible to produce a definition of knowledge without referring to forms, since the concept of knowledge is inherently linked with the nature of its objects and knowledge can be true only if it has the unchanging forms as its content. The aporetic ending of the dialogue is a consequence of this intentional omission and does not commit its author. By contrast, analytic scholars regard the absence of forms in the *Theaetetus* as a radical self-criticism on Plato's part. In their view, the dialogue marks a turning point in Plato's career. He abandons here his metaphysics of forms and presents his readers with an invitation or a challenge to construct an alternative perspective (see e.g. Burnyeat) or proposes a logical-propositional theory of knowledge and truth (see e.g. Fine).[6] As I have said earlier, I am unable to see the presence of

5 See respectively CORNFORD (1935), pp. 102–06; and CASERTANO (1999), pp. 47–49, and (2002), pp. 101–04.

6 A clear statement of the continental interpretation can be found in CORNFORD (1935) and CHERNISS (1936): «the attempt of the *Theaetetus* to define knowledge fails, and this failure demonstrates that the λόγος, the essential characteristic of knowledge, cannot be explained by any theory which takes phenomena to be the objects of intellection». The analytic interpretation can be reconstructed through the works of ROBINSON (1950), RYLE (1960), FINE

(traces of) positive claims about the nature and the definition of knowledge, be they of a logical-propositional or of a generically coherentist type. On the other hand, a clear conception of ἐπιστήμη, a conception which is not logical-propositional, but realistic and correspondentist on the ontological and epistemological level and rests on the existence of forms as objects of thought and knowledge, can be found virtually unchanged in dialogues both earlier and later than the *Theaetetus*. These are basically the reasons why I tend rather decidedly to side with the continentals and why I also agree with the explanation sometimes given to justify Plato's purpose: he fails to mention forms in order to show indirectly that they are necessary for defining knowledge.[7]

In my view, this explanation has a precise textual basis in a *Parmenides* passage. After pointing out the numerous problems with the theory of forms defended by the young Socrates, at 135b–c Parmenides concludes that were one to deny that forms exist or can be grasped by human beings, only an exceptionally skillful interlocutor could refute such a thesis. And yet, as he goes on to argue, were one to abandon the theory of forms, there would remain nothing on which to fix one's thought, for there would not be for each object a form which is always the same (οὐδὲ ὅποι τρέψει τὴν διάνοιαν ἕξει μὴ ἐῶν ἰδέαν τῶν ὄντων ἑκάστου τὴν αὐτὴν ἀεὶ εἶναι). As a result, the power and effectiveness of dialectic would be destroyed. But here is another issue, which the continentals do not raise: why is it that without forms «there would remain nothing on which to fix one's thought»? Of course, and in the first place, because – as Parmenides remarks – without forms there would be no permanent objects to which to turn one's thought. But why should it be impossible to have other objects on which effectively to fix one's thought in order to achieve real knowledge? To answer this question, we have to go back a few lines in the *Parmenides* and look at the discussion of the so-called "greatest difficulty" raised by Parmenides about forms (133b–134e), i.e. the view that forms are totally separate from sensible things. If such a separation is rigorously preserved, the two domains will be foreign to each other and it will be impossible for forms to perform any function with respect to the sensibles and vice versa. This will entail a clear-cut distinction between the science of forms, i.e. a kind of science πολὺ ἀκριβέστερον ἢ τὴν παρ᾽ἡμῖν ἐπιστήμην, and the science of sensible things, i.e. an inferior and imprecise kind of science, by which οὐδὲ γιγνώσκομεν τοῦ θείου οὐδέν. Living in the sensible world, which is separate from forms, human beings will only have access to the latter kind of science and will turn

(1979a) and (1979b), and BURNYEAT (1990). For a general overview of these interpretations, with some clarifications and additions, see SEDLEY (2004), pp. 1–15.

7 See e.g. LAFRANCE (2015), pp. 303–04, 499–501 and 515.

their thought exclusively to the sensibles. Accordingly, the *Theaetetus* aims to verify the soundness of this inferior kind of science that has only the sensible world as its object. It is no coincidence that, according to the first definition of ἐπιστήμη discussed in the dialogue, knowledge coincides with immediate perception of the sensibles, whereas according to the second and third definition it coincides with a form of opinion about the sensibles that involves the use of certain notions or beings present in the soul. These are the only epistemic possibilities available to human beings as a consequence of the "greatest difficulty" of the *Parmenides* and the argument about the unknowability of forms.

Indeed, the correspondence between the ontological and epistemological puzzle raised in the *Parmenides* and its full discussion in the *Theaetetus* is even closer. As is well known, the first definition of knowledge in this dialogue, which concerns the sensibles alone, turns out to be insufficient from an ontological point of view, because it is based on a more or less extreme kind of mobilist ontology resulting in utter epistemological subjectivism. This corresponds to the status of Zeno's λόγοι introduced at the beginning of the *Parmenides* (127e–130a): they only consider the sensible world and therefore give rise to a contradiction whereby each sensible object has different and contrasting properties. To counter this perspective, in the *Parmenides*, Socrates points to a domain of extra-sensible beings that account for the sensibles possessing such properties. And, in the *Theaetetus*, the second and third definition, whereby knowledge consists in a form of true δόξα, then in a form of true δόξα accompanied by a λόγος that guarantees its formal consistency, are ultimately unable to provide a criterion of truth for knowledge, because they fail to identify the conditions of false δόξα and therefore to distinguish truth from falsehood, which is the necessary presupposition for founding truth. In my view, it is once again the *Parmenides* that helps us understand these *Theaetetus* passages, particularly the short and difficult section 132b–c where, in order to get around the problem with the participation of sensible things in separate forms, Socrates suggests conceiving forms as νοήματα that arise only in the soul (οὐδαμοῦ ... ἐγγίγνεσθαι ἄλλοθι ἢ ἐν ψυχαῖς) and construes the ontological participation of the sensibles in forms as an association by the soul and in the soul of certain νοήματα with certain empirical subjects (e.g. of beauty with Alcibiades or, more exactly, of unity and multiplicity or similarity and dissimilarity with one or more sensible things). In the language of the *Theaetetus*, this seems to correspond to the association of certain ὄντα existing in the soul, called κοινά, with the sensible perceptions of empirical beings. And this is what opinion consists in (187a). But, as Parmenides points out in the *Parmenides*, any νοήμα is necessarily "of something that is" (τινός ... ὄντος), not "of nothing" (οὐδενός). Thought refers to this objective content, which justifies and grounds

it and enables it to associate one or more beings with a certain property. Were this not the case, thought would not exist as such, i.e. it would be completely devoid of content. This clearly means that the only possible criterion for the truth and consistency of a νοῆμα, hence of a κοινόν, in the soul, and of the opinion which is the result of its association with sensible perceptions, is the reference to an objective model functioning as a yardstick. Without such a model it would be impossible for us to demarcate the content of a νοῆμα or κοινόν and to assess whether it is *truly* or *falsely* associated with perceived sensible beings.

I discussed at length this exegetical issue not only to clarify the general assumptions of my reading of the *Theaetetus*, but because it represents, as will become clear, the basis for the remarks I shall make about false opinion in the abovementioned section of the dialogue. To put it in a nutshell, (1) like most continental interpreters, I found it plausible that the lack of reference to forms should be regarded as an indirect demonstration of the epistemological failure produced by renouncing to intelligible realities. In addition, (2) I believe the programmatic reasons for this provisional renunciation can be found in the *Parmenides*. Most importantly, (3) this enables us to claim that the arguments leading Socrates to the paradoxical conclusion that false opinion is impossible are not fallacious *in themselves*, as is claimed by the majority of interpreters,[8] because they correctly show that in a world made up by sensible beings it is impossible to reach any form of ἐπιστήμη, whether of an immediately perceptive or a doxastic type. By contrast, those arguments *become* fallacious if we accept the existence of forms.

5. I shall conclude by making a supplementary exegetical point. The *Theaetetus* should not be viewed, as I have argued so far, only as a demonstration of the fact that, given the difficulties raised in the *Parmenides*, ἐπιστήμη is impossible in the absence of forms. The thrust of the *Theaetetus* is elenctic or refutative as well. By showing the untenability of the three definitions of ἐπιστήμη, Plato aims to highlight the untenability of three positive theories of knowledge which can be historically identified: (1) Protagoras' subjectivist sensualism and its Heraclitean origin; (2) all forms of doxastic knowledge, which may plausibly be attributed, among others, to the sophists; (3) the possible refinement of doxastic knowledge by means of a λόγος that justifies it, which might be ascribed to Antisthenes.[9]

8 See e.g. FERRARI (2011), pp. 90–105.

9 (1) and (2) have been suggested and discussed by LAFRANCE (2019^3), pp. 202–08; (3) by BRANCACCI (1993).

2 False Opinion

I should now like to make some remarks about *Theaetetus* 187b–201c. After proposing the second definition of knowledge as true opinion (187b), in this section Socrates attempts to determine the conditions of false opinion. The latter must be distinguishable from true opinion, if we are to avoid the embarrassing consequence that all opinions are equally true or equally false.

This consequence would be incompatible with there being false opinions and, most importantly, would undermine the principle whereby truth can only exist as the opposite of falsehood. Socrates' first attempt fails because it is shown that we can have or not have knowledge of the things which are. As a result, if knowledge is true opinion, we can either have a true opinion about the things which are or not have any opinion, with no room left for false opinion (188a–c). Socrates' second attempt shifts the focus from the epistemological opposition between knowing and not knowing to the ontological opposition between being and non-being. Having a true opinion, i.e. knowing, means having an opinion about that which is. By contrast, having an opinion about that which is not, means not having any opinion at all, i.e. not knowing, for it is impossible that opinion should have as its object that which is not. As a result, from this perspective too no room seems to be left for false opinion (188d–189b). The third attempt is based on the description of thinking (διανοεῖν) as a dialogue of the soul with itself. In this context, false opinion seems to consist in a confusion between two opinions – both true and therefore both concerning the things which are. But if true opinion is knowledge, when we have two or more true opinions about the things which are, there will be as many instances of knowledge, whereas when we have no opinions, there will be no knowledge. Now, it is impossible for us to confuse opinions both about the things we know, because we know them, and about the things we do not know, because we will have no opinions to confuse. Finally, it is also impossible to confuse an opinion about something we know with an opinion about something we do not know, because in the latter case there will once again be no opinion (189b–190e). Socrates' fourth attempt is particularly complex. He describes the soul as a block of wax where sensible perceptions leave imprints, and false opinion as a mistaken association of these imprints with the present perceptions producing them. When imprints for some reason become weak or blurry, the present perception may be connected with an imprint other than the one corresponding to it. Yet this attempt too proves unfruitful. On the one hand, the deterioration of the imprints in the soul is unconvincingly accounted for (the reasons given include a bad nature of the soul, disease, hallucination or perceptual mistakes and delusions). On the other hand, there is

no explanation of how error and falsehood can occur in the case of opinions having a content that cannot be traced back to perception. For example, falsehood seems to be impossible in the case of numbers, where there is no perishable perceptual basis for false opinions (190e–196c). Later in the dialogue we find a fifth attempt to establish the legitimacy of false opinion by means of the celebrated aviary image. As Socrates claims, we should distinguish between the acquisition of a cognitive content and its recovery and reuse once it has been acquired. Error and falsehood could arise when we recover a certain cognitive content instead of another. Yet this would once again result in the paradox whereby error and falsehood contradictorily derive from knowledge of the cognitive content originally acquired. Consequently, the same cognitive content would simultaneously represent knowledge and non-knowledge (197a–200a). After this last attempt has failed, Socrates sets about refuting the initial view that true opinion coincides with knowledge (201a–c).[10]

Let us now draw some conclusions from this quick and extremely schematic reconstruction of the *Theaetetus* section where the definition of ἐπιστήμη as true opinion is discussed and the puzzle about false opinion emerges. Of Socrates' five attempts to solve the aporia, the first, third, fourth and fifth share, in different ways, the *epistemological* assumption that false opinion is unfounded. This ultimately means that, as far as opinion is concerned, there is no epistemic halfway house between true opinion and a complete lack of opinion. The only possible alternative is between having an opinion or not having it at all. As for the second attempt, it rests, as I have said, on the *ontological* view that false opinion is unfounded, i.e. that the object of false opinion cannot possibly exist, because it is identical with non-being or a non-being. Therefore, my remarks here will only concern the following two points: the epistemological impossibility of falsehood considered as falling between true opinion and lack of opinion and the ontological impossibility of falsehood due to its referring to non-being.

3 The Epistemological Impossibility of False Opinion

The impossibility of falsehood considered as falling between true opinion and lack of opinion is clearly expressed at 188c. If knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) is by

10 For a detailed reconstruction of this section of the dialogue, which I have only briefly and schematically summarized, see SEDLEY (2004), pp. 120–52, and NARCY (2013). A useful discussion of part of the relevant (essentially anglophone) critical literature on it can be found in CHAPPELL (2004), pp. 150–96.

definition true opinion, since we can either know or not know (εἰδέναι ἢ μὴ εἰδέναι) something and there exist no intermediate processes such as learning and forgetting (μανθάνειν καὶ ἐπιλανθάνεσθαι), then we can only have a true opinion about something or no opinion at all. Yet what is needed is an account of how it is possible δοξάζειν τινὰ ψευδῆ, which is clearly a reality and is necessary to establish a criterion of truth for true opinion. For we can only have an opinion about something we know and cannot have an opinion about something we do not know. Consequently, leaving aside what we do not know, our opinion about what we know is necessarily true, since otherwise we should assume that we may have a false opinion about what we know – but we know it. Hence it is impossible for us (1) to have a false opinion about what we know; (2) to have a false opinion about what we do not know; (3) and to have a false opinion about things of which we know some and do not know others, for we know the former (hence we have a true opinion about them) and do not know the latter (hence we have no opinion at all about them). According to the majority of commentators, Socrates' argument rests on a series of fallacies. First, the strict and exclusive opposition between knowing and not knowing, which rules out any intermediate process of transition from one state to the other as well as the possibility to have partial knowledge of something. Secondly, adherence to a visual-perceptual epistemic model, whereby knowing and not knowing are equated with perception or lack of perception of something individual (so that error could only arise when we confuse two perceptions – which is impossible). Such an epistemic model would have nothing to do with the predicative and descriptive attitude that is peculiar to opinion.[11]

As I have said, in my view this argument is perfectly coherent and consistent in a certain possible world, i.e. the sensible and one-level world inhabited only by empirical beings and comprised within the limits set by the greatest difficulty of the *Parmenides*: such a world has no access to separate forms, which are unknowable to it and ultimately non-existent.

Let me now make some textual remarks about *Theaetetus* 188a–b. It has been noticed that Socrates' starting assumption seems to beg the question: he describes *knowledge* (ἐπιστήμη) as true opinion, yet later it is claimed that opinion can only be about what we *know*. This leads us to regard true opinion, i.e. *knowledge*, as identical with any opinion, for opinion can only be about what we *know* (if every opinion is about what we know and if knowledge

11 See CORNFORD (1935), pp. 111–14, and recently FERRARI (2011), pp. 92–7 and 422–25, n. 260–61, who offers an overview of the matter. See also the more cautious remarks of SEDLEY (2004), pp. 120–25.

coincides with true opinion, then every opinion is true).[12] But there is no such question-begging in this passage. The knowledge that is identical with true opinion is rightly called ἐπιστήμη, which is the "true knowledge" or "science" the *Theaetetus* is searching for. By contrast, the "knowledge" which forms the basis for an opinion about something is systematically referred to here by the verb εἰδέναι. Thus, a distinction is drawn between "knowing" and "not knowing" something (εἰδέναι) – the condition for having an opinion at all – and "knowledge" (ἐπιστήμη), i.e. *true* opinion. In short, we can have (1) δόξα about something, which depends on εἰδέναι that about which we have an opinion. This is the state of the soul when it is occupying itself, by itself, with the things which are (ὅτι ποτ᾽ἔχει ἡ ψυχή, ὅταν αὐτὴ καθ᾽αὑτὴν πραγματεύηται περὶ τὰ ὄντα, 187a), i.e. it establishes connections with sensible perceptions (τῷ περὶ ἐκείνων συλλογισμῷ, 186d). Now, the εἰδέναι that forms the basis of opinion can only consist in perceptual "knowledge" of the sensibles. It is with respect to this knowledge and starting from it that the soul develops its opinions, i.e. establishes connections by focusing on it. This cannot be otherwise in a wholly sensible world, where there exists only sensible "knowledge" about which the soul can have opinions. In this general sphere of perceptual knowledge of sensible things about which the soul has opinions, there can arise (2) true opinion, which coincides with knowledge construed as ἐπιστήμη. As a result, there is no question-begging in Socrates' argument nor any overlap between "knowledge" as a condition for δόξα and "knowledge" as true δόξα. This enables us to understand why such intermediate processes as learning and forgetting are excluded from consideration. The reason is fully consistent and by no means fallacious: the basis for doxastic activity is perceptual knowledge, here construed as present, so that perception of a sensible thing either occurs or it does not and cannot be learnt or forgot while it is occurring. In addition, from this perceptual point of view, it is not possible to imagine a form of partial "knowledge" of something (except for instances of mistake, perceptual delusion, disease or hallucination). I do not think Socrates is here referring to a visual epistemic model accounting for perception of individual beings – the other fallacy of which he is accused – since the kind of εἰδέναι at issue is both περὶ πάντα and καθ᾽ἕκαστον (188a), i.e. about *something* but also *about all things*.

Now, as we have seen, the perceptual knowledge which forms the basis for opinion cannot be false – either it exists, or it does not. For perception is always true when it occurs, and nobody mistakes Socrates for Theaetetus or a human being for an ox, if they see them at the same time. They may not identify them

12 See BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 70–77; HARDY (2001), pp. 162–71; ROOCHNIK (2002), p. 45; and STERN (2008), pp. 222–27.

or not determine correctly their relationship but, based on their own distinct perceptions, they cannot possibly be unable to grasp the difference between them. This being so, the opinion arising in our soul when «it is occupying itself, by itself, with the things which are» must *first of all* be about «things which we know», i.e. we have perceived. This is why it is impossible for us to have an opinion, either true or false, about "things which we do not know", i.e. we have not perceived. With no perception on which "to occupy itself", the soul has no opinions either. *Secondly*, this opinion must be true or false not because of the perceptual knowledge on which it rests and works, for that knowledge is always true. It must be true or false in itself, i.e. when it originates in the soul, or rather with respect to the soul's activity that produces it. This activity consists in the soul connecting or associating certain properties or determinations with sensible perceptions, so that the resulting opinion can be shown to be true or false only by distinguishing correct connections and associations (e.g. of beauty with Alcibiades or of non-identity with the relationship between a human being and an ox) from incorrect ones (e.g. of restraint with Alcibiades or of identity with the relationship between a fish and a bird). Now, the soul can draw these determinations and properties only from itself and it is only by itself, i.e. by focusing on itself, that it can associate them with sensible perceptions. How are we then to establish its criterion of truth, i.e. determine whether the associations it makes are true or false? It is impossible to say, for the soul possesses no extra-sensory criterion, not even when it «carries on a discourse with itself» (189b–190e). The only available criterion of truth, then, turns out to be the perceptual one. However, such a criterion makes no distinction between true and false perceptions but, as I have pointed out, only between actual perceptions, which are always true and produce opinions, and perceptions which do not occur and therefore produce no opinions. To put it differently, in a world inhabited only by sensible things perception of sensible things is either certainly true or does not occur at all. But the soul has no other material about which to produce opinions than the perceptual one, and no other criterion of truth by which to form opinions than the perceptual one. This means that opinion is governed by the same truth conditions as perception. An actual and true perception gives rise to an opinion, whereas a lack of perception, which is not false but simply does not exist, does not give rise to any opinion, not even a false one. As a result, in the opinions originating within the soul we cannot distinguish truth from falsehood, but only the arising or otherwise of opinions. This leads Socrates to a perfectly consistent conclusion: it is impossible both to determine how we can have false opinions and to define false opinions. Yet this does not entail – and Socrates by no means suggests – that all opinions are true, and no opinion is false. It just means that it is impossible to determine

which opinions are false. If there is no criterion of truth for opinions, the latter are neither true nor false, or they can be regarded as all true or all false. This is why Socrates, who has proven unable to identify the origin of falsehood, does not claim that he has identified the origin of truth. He just argues, at 188c, that we can have opinions only about what we know (but fails to specify whether these opinions are true or false).[13] Unsurprisingly, at the end of the section of the dialogue discussing the second definition of ἐπιστήμη (201a–c), the definitive refutation of the view that knowledge is true opinion is coherently based on the reversion to a perceptual model. Directly witnessing an event produces a stronger form of knowledge than is the doxastic persuasion we can get from a second-hand account. This shows once again the lack of a criterion of truth for δόξα, since we cannot be sure whether or not a witness tells the truth, whereas directly witnessing an event enables us to be immediately sure whether or not that event has occurred.[14] We should not *wrongly* equate opinion with direct perception of something but become aware that opinion has no independent criterion of truth. Knowledge cannot be identical with true opinion, and the only form of knowledge that does have a criterion of truth is direct perception.

This examination of the epistemological impossibility of falsehood considered as falling between true opinion and lack of opinion shows that, in a world inhabited exclusively by empirical beings, while sensible perception does possess a basic criterion of truth (whereby all perceptions either are true or do not exist), δόξα does not, for it arises out of an additional activity of the soul *alone* on perceptions of the sensibles. A criterion of truth for δόξα could only be established by determining a regulating principle for the soul's activity, i.e. a universal model, independent of the soul, by which to gauge the correctness or otherwise of that activity. Yet such a principle cannot be the same which establishes the truth conditions of sensible perception, nor can it coincide with the immediate truth of perception, whose inadequacy for opinion has already been shown. Rather, it should be located at the soul's level. Now, as the truth of sensible perception depends on the immediate perceptual relationship

---

13 In other words, the impossibility of identifying false opinions does not demonstrate that *all opinions are true*, but that *there is no criterion* for distinguishing truth from falsehood and that therefore *they are indifferent*. As a result, we can say that we have an opinion, but cannot specify our claim. We may say we have an opinion about what we know, yet this does not imply that that opinion is true, but just that we have formed an opinion on an actual perceptual basis.

14 The celebrated "jury passage" of the *Theaetetus* (201a–c) has been examined by so many scholars, and from so many different points of view, that it is impossible to give here an even schematic account of it: see only BURNYEAT (1980) and (1990), pp. 124–27; LEWIS (1981); HARING (1982); HARDY (2001), pp. 206–15; and SEDLEY (2004), pp. 149–51.

between sense organs and external sensible objects, so the truth of the soul's activity could only be established by means of the relationship between the soul and certain non-sensible objective beings. This translates into a significant extension of the sphere of being. Given my exegetical assumptions, it will be clear that I am alluding to the theory of forms and the rejection of the strictly separatist view which is described in the *Parmenides* passage about the "greatest difficulty" and proven untenable in the *Theaetetus*. What is needed, I believe, is an intelligible model to assess the way in which the soul associates properties and determinations with sensible perceptions. Since such a model is not inside, but outside the soul, and is objective and universal, by knowing it the soul can use it as a criterion of truth for identifying correctly the properties and determinations that belong or do not belong to sensible things. As a result, the soul no longer connects common properties and determinations with its perceptions of the sensibles in a self-referential way, i.e. without relying on an objective criterion. If the soul knows these determinations and properties in themselves, as intelligible forms, it can objectively ascertain whether or not the sensibles possess them. We get, then, the following hierarchy of cognitive powers: (1) perception of the sensibles, (2) opinion and (3) knowledge. As I have already said, (1) perception provides us with evidence about the sensibles. Such evidence is immediate and true, yet momentary. (2) Opinion is an assessment whereby the soul connects common properties and determinations with its perceptions. Opinion is true when the soul associates a sensible thing it perceives with a property belonging to that thing. The soul can determine whether its association is correct or incorrect because it knows the models, or intelligible forms, of these properties or determinations. By contrast, false opinion arises when the soul associates its perceptions with common properties and determinations without having thorough knowledge of the latter.

Finally, (3) knowledge of common properties and determinations in themselves is science proper, i.e. thorough knowledge of universal and unchanging beings. As is the case with perception of sensible things, either we know these beings, or we do not. We cannot have false knowledge of them.[15] The extension of the ontological sphere to include beings other than the sensibles, i.e. the models of common properties and determinations derivatively belonging to

15 This conclusion is a matter of controversy among scholars, but we may leave this issue aside here. Suffice it say that the truth of our knowledge of forms has a character that the truth of perception and opinion lack, i.e. stability or permanence, which depends on the universality and immutability of forms as opposed to the changeability of the objects of perception and opinion.

the sensibles, opens up an intermediate epistemic space for opinion as such, construed as a cognitive activity associating those properties and determinations with sensible perceptions. In this space it is possible to identify truth or falsehood, depending on whether or not the soul makes its associations with full knowledge of the models of the common properties and determinations it connects with the sensibles.

Such an outcome does not explicitly emerge from the aporetic development of the *Theaetetus*. This is as clear as it is, I think, intentional – and the *Theaetetus* does give some hints about it. As we have seen, in the only possible world of the *Theaetetus*, i.e. the sensible one-level world, learning and forgetting cannot occur, for they have nothing to do with actual perception or lack of perception (see 188a, the first attempt to identify the origin of false opinion). Alternatively, they are regarded as inadequate, since they can perhaps account for the errors made by the soul when associating an actual perception with the imprint of a previous perception (see 191d–195a, the fourth attempt to identify the origin of false opinion), but they are unable to account for the errors in the cognitive associations not based on perceptual data, as is the case with numbers. In my view, this marginalization of learning and forgetting is an implicit invitation to substitute the one-level ontological perspective of the *Theaetetus* with the two-level perspective described e.g. in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, where learning and forgetting play a key role within the well-known doctrine of recollection.[16] At *Men.* 80d–81d we find a discussion of the sophistic paradox about the impossibility of inquiry, which is based on an exclusive and exhaustive opposition between "knowing" and "not knowing" similar to the one that frustrates Socrates' and Theaetetus' first, third, fourth and fifth attempt to identify the origin of false opinion. To get around that paradox and to justify the possibility of opinion, either true or false, as an epistemic and ontological space intermediate between perception of the sensibles and knowledge of the intelligibles, learning is described as the recollection of certain intelligible beings previously acquired by the soul, which forgets them when embodied. Opinion arises out of the slow and demanding recovery of this knowledge contained in the soul, i.e. out of *recollection*, which starts from the perceptual processes prompting the soul further to inquire into the cognitively inadequate results of perception. The truth and

16 A possible (implicit) reference to the doctrine of recollection, and consequently a possible relation between the *Theaetetus* and the mentioned dialogues, has been noticed and discussed, with different conclusions, by many scholars: see e.g. CORNFORD (1935), pp. 27–28; MCDOWELL (1973), pp. 116–17; BURNYEAT (1977); SEDLEY (2004), pp. 28–30 and 144–45; EL MURR (2013), pp. 166–71; and FERRARI (2011), pp. 123–31.

falsehood of opinion are provided with a solid and consistent basis, for they are connected to recollection, which is a non-linear and uneven process liable to deviation and error. Let me propose the following rough scheme as an example. Actual perception of the sensible being "Alcibiades" or the sensible beings "Socrates" and "Alcibiades" affects the soul. The soul can become aware that the common property or determination possessed by "Alcibiades" is "beauty" and the common determination or property of the relationship between "Socrates" and "Alcibiades" is "dissimilarity", and can come to form the true opinions "Alcibiades is beautiful" and "Socrates and Alcibiades are dissimilar". However, it can do so only insofar as it recovers (or has recovered) its previous knowledge of those common properties or determinations *in themselves*, i.e. of the intelligible forms of beauty and dissimilarity. If the soul *comes to recollect* this knowledge, it will become aware that the common determination or property possessed by "Alcibiades" is a derivative form of beauty in itself, which resembles its model, however inadequately, and is therefore also called "beauty". Likewise, the common determination or property of the relationship between "Socrates" and "Alcibiades" is a derivative form of dissimilarity in itself, which resembles its model, however inadequately, and is therefore also called "dissimilarity". If the soul *is unable to recollect*, or *has not yet recollected*, this knowledge, it will either fail to become aware of the common determinations or properties of the sensibles it perceives and will thus form no opinion; or it will mix up its unfocused recollections and mistake those common determinations and properties for others and will thus form false opinions. Since recollection, i.e. learning, is about knowledge of intelligible beings, it offers a criterion of truth not just for our opinions about the sensibles we perceive, i.e. our associations of common determinations and properties with the sensibles, but also for abstract objects not directly derived from perception, e.g. numbers. Consequently, it is learning – construed as recollection – and forgetting that can provide a foundation for the truth or falsehood of an opinion. The exclusion of these epistemically indispensable processes hints at the ontological inadequacy of the one-level world of the *Theaetetus*.

What is needed is a bigger world, where learning and forgetting can be justified.

4 The Ontological Impossibility of False Opinion

As I said earlier, the second issue I should like to discuss is the view that falsehood, being referred to non-being, is ontologically impossible. This idea is suggested in *Theaetetus* 188d–189b, where Socrates makes his second attempt at

identifying the origin of false opinion. He proposes to examine this issue not «according to knowing and not knowing» (κατὰ τὸ εἰδέναι καὶ μὴ εἰδέναι) – i.e. the perceptual knowledge enabling the soul to form opinions – but «according to the being and non-being» (κατὰ τὸ εἶναι καὶ μή) of the objects the soul has opinions about. This immediately produces an association between «having an opinion about that which is not» (τὸ μὴ ὂν δοξάσει) – i.e. that which is not both «with respect to the things which are» (περὶ τῶν ὄντων) and "in itself" (αὐτὸ καθ'αὑτό) – and «having an opinion about that which is not true» (μὴ ἀληθῆ … οἴηται). This association clearly depends on the assumption of its reciprocal, i.e. the association between that which is true and that which is. As a result, if having an opinion about that which is true means having an opinion about that which is, having an opinion about that which is not true, i.e. is false, means having an opinion about that which is not, i.e. non-being. This is evidently impossible and contradictory, for that which is not, or non-being, cannot be the object of knowledge, be it perception or opinion, because it is not. All perceptions, insofar as they occur, are perceptions *of something*, i.e. are directed *towards something*, towards an object which is (εἰ ἕν τι … τῶν ὄντων τι). If they are perceptions *of nothing*, i.e. are directed towards *nothing*, towards an object which is not, they do not occur as perceptions. Similarly, as regards the objects of opinion, if opinion occurs it is about something which is (ὁ δ'ἕν τι δοξάζων … ὄν τι), whereas if it is about something which is not, then it is not false, but simply does not occur (ὅν γε μηδὲν δοξάζων τὸ παράπαν οὐδὲ δοξάζει). It should be noted that Socrates does not claim he has failed to determine the origin of false opinion, in the sphere of opinion about that which is not, but that he has succeeded in identifying the origin of true opinion. Nor does he associate opinion about that which is with an opinion that is necessarily true. He just points out that it is impossible to have an opinion about that which is not, and that we should look elsewhere for the origin of false opinion (189b). This leaves us with one possible type of opinion, i.e. opinion about that which is. As in the previous case, we are unable to determine the criterion of truth for this type of opinion, i.e. whether and how it can be true or false.

Here too, scholars have highlighted at least two inconsistencies in Socrates' argument. The first would be the confusion between two different meanings of the non-being of that which is not as a possible object for false opinion. These two meanings, which are hinted at in the passage, would be as follows: (1) not-being «in itself», i.e. absolute non-being (referred to by the words αὐτὸ καθ'αὑτό at 188d10); (2) "relative" non-being, i.e. the determinate negation of one or more of the properties and attributes of that which is (referred to by the words τὸ μὴ ὂν … περὶ τῶν ὄντων at 188d9). The former does not exist at all hence it cannot be the content of an opinion, not even a false one. The latter is about

something which is, hence it could be the content of an opinion, albeit a false one. The second inconsistency would be the reversion to a visual-perceptual epistemic model whereby having and not having an opinion are once again equated with perception or lack of perception of something individual. This means that we could only have an opinion about something or not have an opinion about anything and would be unable to distinguish between false and true opinions. Which is incompatible with opinion's predicative and descriptive attitude.[17] These two fallacies would produce an incorrect view of truth and falsehood as ontological properties of beings, not of propositions about beings. Truth may be the ontological property of that which is, whereas falsehood is impossible, for it is an ontological property of that which is not and, like that which is not, cannot be described as existing. Such fallacies, already mentioned in a celebrated passage of the *Euthydemus* (283e–284a) which I cannot discuss here,[18] are dealt with in the well-known concluding section of the *Sophist*. Two kinds of "non-being" are distinguished there, i.e. absolute and relative non-being. The former coincides with absolute nothingness and therefore cannot be talked about, while the latter is the determinate negation of some of the properties that things possess or do not possess and is totally legitimate both from an ontological and a logical point of view. Falsehood is situated in the predicative dimension, i.e. the reconstruction of the relations between different beings or between subjects and predicates which all exist in the same way. Thought, discourse and judgement are true if they correctly reproduce within the predicative dimension the actual relations between the things which are. They are false if they fail to correctly reproduce within the predicative dimension the actual relations between the things which are. In both cases, we think, say and judge things "which are". But whereas truth is an ontological property of things which are – for they are reproduced in thought, discourse and judgement "as they are" in themselves and in their relations – falsehood cannot be an ontological property of things – if it were, it would belong to things other than those which are and are true, i.e. things which are not in an absolute sense. Falsehood turns out to be a property of thought, discourse and judgement about things which are, insofar as they are reproduced in thought, discourse and judgement "as they are not", i.e. *in a*

17 See again CORNFORD (1935), pp. 115–16; BOSTOCK (1988), pp. 165–69; BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 77–83; HARDY (2001), p. 173; and FERRARI (2011), pp. 92–97 and 426–31, n. 262–63.

18 I would just like to point out that, in my opinion, while Euthydemus, in the *Euthydemus*, uses this argument misleadingly to show that, if falsehood cannot be found, everything is true, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates simply concludes that falsehood cannot be found in the sphere of non-being and that this implies the impossibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood (see also *supra*, n. 13). Thus, if there is no falsehood, there is no truth either.

different way from "how they are". This is possible because the "non-being" thus expressed in thought, discourse and judgement consists in things which "are" being *different* from how they actually are in their relations.[19]

I am quite sure that this analysis of Socrates' (presumably fallacious) arguments in the *Theaetetus* and their explanation in the *Sophist* are correct within a Platonic conceptual framework. Yet in the one-level world of the *Theaetetus*, which is confined to the sensible sphere, such fallacies are perfectly justified and their paradoxical and contradictory character appears absolutely coherent, for they show once again that the ontology of the *Theaetetus* is too narrow. As we have seen, in this passage knowledge is defined as true opinion and opinion described as a self-referential activity of the soul "focusing" on sense perceptions, which are true when they occur, and "associating" them with certain common properties and determinations it possesses. In addition, at the doxastic level of the soul's activity no criterion of truth can be found for distinguishing true and false opinions, so that the only criterion for the soul's activity derives from perception: if there are perceptions about which to have opinions, the soul will form them; if there are no such perceptions, the soul will form no opinions. Therefore, from the viewpoint of Socrates, who attempts to distinguish true and false opinion "according to the being and non-being" of their objects, the soul can only work on sense perceptions, which are true in themselves, and on the common properties and determinations which it associates with them in and by itself. This means that, if we have an opinion, it is about something which is, i.e. the common property or determination the soul associates with its sensible perception, whereas if there is no sensible perception with which the soul can associate a common property or determination, there will be nothing about which to have an opinion and therefore no opinion. Clearly, the distinction between an absolute and a relative sense of non-being has no role to play here, because the non-being of a perceptual content, which makes it impossible to form an opinion, consists in the absolute absence of any object whatsoever. But even if the soul forms an opinion about a sensible perception, that opinion can only be said to be about something which is, i.e. a perceptual content that exists and whose perceptual basis is always true; and when the soul associates common properties and determinations with that perceptual content, we are unable to say whether these associations are true or false, for they do not depend on an objective criterion allowing us to distinguish between true and false associations (i.e. opinions). Consequently, the relative sense of non-being seems once again to be irrelevant, for all sensible

19 For this distinction of truth and falsehood in the *Sophist*, see FRONTEROTTA (2013).

perceptions correspond to objects which are and there is no objective criterion for establishing with which perceptions the soul should or should not associate certain common determinations and properties. In other words, in a world where the only access to the objects of knowledge is sensible perception or the absence of perception, Socrates can only distinguish between having and not having an opinion about those objects. The former refers to that which simply is, the latter to that which simply is not. There is, by contrast, no criterion for determining which opinions about that which is are true and which are false. In my view, the problem with falsehood does not lie in it being identified with absolute non-being construed as its ontological property, for Socrates denies that false opinion can be an opinion about that which is not. Rather, since falsehood cannot be an ontological property of that which is not (for it is not and falsehood would then be impossible), it must be situated in the sphere of that which is and of opinion about that which is. This means that falsehood is close to truth, albeit distinct from it. From an epistemic point of view, only an opinion that exists, not one that does not, can be true or false. Similarly, from an ontological point of view, true or false opinion can only be about that which is, because it is impossible to have an opinion about that which is not. Falsehood and truth, then, are both characters of opinions about that which is. But they cannot be demarcated either by perceptions, since perceptions are always true, or by the soul's associating common properties and determinations with perceptions, since the soul has no regulating principle or universal model for establishing whether the outcomes of its activity are correct or not.

In the light of my previous remarks, it should be clear how in my view we must proceed to identify a criterion of objective truth for opinion and the ontological foundation of false opinion. What is needed is an extension of the one-level ontology of the *Theaetetus*, which derives from the programmatic testing of the disastrous results of the "greatest difficulty" in the *Parmenides*, i.e. the separation of forms from the sensibles and their inaccessibility to human beings. If intelligible forms are regarded as existing and knowable, then it becomes possible to distinguish between perception of the sensibles and the attribution of common determinations and properties to the sensibles. In the case of perception there is a basic criterion of truth whereby sensible perceptions are either actually and momentarily true or they do not occur. As for the attribution of common determinations and properties to the sensibles, if forms are regarded as existing and knowable, the soul will have a criterion of truth as well. Common properties and determinations are truly and correctly associated with sensible perceptions when the soul, by knowing the forms, recognizes that those determinations and properties belong, however

derivatively, to the sensibles. Common determinations and properties are falsely and wrongly attributed to the sensibles when the soul, not knowing or imperfectly knowing the forms, makes a mistake. In this case, the soul mixes up and confuses the common properties and determinations. For example, if the soul has no thorough knowledge of the forms of beauty and ugliness, it may associate "ugliness", not "beauty", with the perceived sensible being "Alcibiades"; if it has no thorough knowledge of the forms of similarity and dissimilarity, and possibly of man and horse, to the perceived sensible beings "Alexander" and "Bucephalus" it may attribute similarity (for e.g. they are both animals), not dissimilarity (for e.g. the former is a rational animal, whereas the latter is not).

As I have shown earlier from the epistemic viewpoint of cognitive processes, so too from the ontological viewpoint of the objects of knowledge the introduction of forms enables us to identify and demarcate an intermediate space for the objects of opinion. These objects, which fall in between perceived sensible beings and forms, are the common determinations or properties that the soul associates with perceived sensible beings. Insofar as they are, the common determinations and properties belong to the sphere of being. No reference is needed here to non-being, either relative (for each of these common properties or determinations is what it is and is not different from what it is) or absolute (for each of these common determinations or properties simply is and is not nothing). As a result, all determinations and properties are true insofar as they correspond to beings that really and objectively exist. Yet they can be attributed to perceived sensible beings correctly, i.e. truly, or incorrectly, i.e. falsely. This means that truth, being a full correspondence to that which is how "it is", is an ontological property of the things which are, including in the case of the objects of opinion. Falsehood, by contrast, arises when the soul makes incorrect associations in the domain of opinion, i.e. – as the *Sophist* will make it clear – the predicative dimension peculiar to thought, discourse and judgement about things which are. As objective and universal models, forms enable us to distinguish between a correct and an incorrect mode of attributing common determinations and properties to perceived sensible beings: the former corresponds to reality as it is, the latter does not correspond to or is different from reality as it is. Forms, then, enable us to situate the difference between truth and falsehood within the sphere of the objects of opinion. Only if the narrow and exclusively sensible perspective of the *Theaetetus* is substituted with this broader ontology can the relative sense of non-being play a positive role in solving Socrates' puzzle about the origin of false opinion.

In other words, we need to get out of the limited world of the *Theaetetus* and, despite the *Parmenides*, return to Plato's standard ontology.

References

ARONADIO, F. (2016). *L'aisthesis e le strategie argomentative di Platone nel* Teeteto. Bibliopolis. Napoli.

BOSTOCK, D. (1988). *Plato's* Theaetetus. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

BRANCACCI, A. (1993). La terza definizione di scienza nel *Teeteto*. In: BATTEGAZZORE, A.M. (ed.). *Dimostrazione, argomentazione dialettica e argomentazione retorica nel pensiero antico*. Sagep. Genova, pp. 107–32.

BURNYEAT, M. (1977). Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 24, pp. 7–16.

BURNYEAT, M. (1980). Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 54, pp. 173–92.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*, with a translation of the *Theaetetus* by M.J. Lewett, revised by M. Burnyeat. Hackett. Indianapolis-Cambridge.

CASERTANO, G. (1999). Logos, dialegesthai e ousia nel *Teeteto*. In LUONGO, G. (ed.). *Munera Parva. Studi in onore di Boris Ulianich*. Fridericiana Editrice Universitaria. Napoli, pp. 35–53.

CASERTANO, G. (2002). Le definizioni socratiche di episteme. In: CASERTANO, G. (ed.). *Il* Teeteto *di Platone: strutture e problematiche*. Loffredo. Napoli, pp. 87–117.

CHAPPELL, T. (2004). *Reading Plato's* Theaetetus. Academia Verlag. Sankt Augustin.

CHERNISS, H.F. (1936). The Philosophical Economy of the Theory of Ideas. *American Journal of Philology*, 57, pp. 445–56.

CORNFORD, F.M.D. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.

EL MURR, D. (2013). *Desmos* et *Logos*: de l'opinion vraie à la connaissance (*Ménon*, 97e–98a et *Théétète*, 201c–210b). In: EL MURR, D. (ed.). *La mesure du savoir. Études sur le* Théétète *de Platon*. Vrin. Paris, pp. 151–71.

FERRARI, F. (2002). Verità e giudizio: il senso e la funzione dell'essere tra αἴσθησις e δόξα. In: CASERTANO, G. (ed.). *Il* Teeteto *di Platone: strutture e problematiche*. Loffredo. Napoli, pp. 156–74.

FERRARI, F. (2011). Platone, *Teeteto*, a cura di F. Ferrari. Rizzoli. Milano.

FINE, G. (1979a). Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*. *Philosophical Review*, 88, pp. 366–97.

FINE, G. (1979b). False Belief in the *Theaetetus*. *Phronesis*, 24, pp. 70–80.

FRONTEROTTA, F. (2013). "Theaetetus sits – Theaetetus flies". Ontology, predication and truth in Plato's *Sophist* (263a–d). In: BOSSI, B.; ROBINSON, T.M. (eds.). *Plato's* Sophist *Revisited*. De Gruyter. Berlin, pp. 205–23.

HARDY, J. (2001). *Platons Theorie des Wissens im* Theaitet. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Göttingen.

HARING, E.S. (1982). The *Theaetetus* ends well. *Review of Metaphysics*, 35, pp. 509–28.

LAFRANCE, Y. (2015). *La théorie platonicienne de la Doxa*, Deuxième édition, revue et augmentée de *Corrigenda*, de Notes, d'*Addenda* à la bibliographie (1975–2003) et d'une Postface par Y. Lafrance; et d'un Supplément bibliographique (2003–2013) et d'une Postface par L. Brisson. Les Belles Lettres. Paris.

LAFRANCE, Y. (2019^{3}). La connaissance: science et opinion. In: BRISSON, L.; FRONTEROTTA, F. (eds.). *Lire Platon*. PUF. Paris, pp. 191–214.

LEWIS, F. (1981). Knowledge and Eyewitness: Plato, *Theaetetus* 201a–c. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 11, pp. 185–97.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato*, Theaetetus, translated with notes. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

NARCY, M. (2002). Doxazein: "opinare" o "giudicare"?. In: CASERTANO, G. (ed.). *Il* Teeteto *di Platone: strutture e problematiche*. Loffredo. Napoli, pp. 7–23.

NARCY, M. (2013). Pourquoi l'erreur?. In: EL MURR, D. (ed.). *La mesure du savoir. Études sur le* Théétète *de Platon*. Vrin. Paris, pp. 95–128.

ROBINSON, R. (1950). Forms and Error in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Philosophical Review*, 59, pp. 3–30.

ROOCHNIK, D. (2002). Self-Recognition in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Ancient Philosophy*. 22, pp. 37–51.

RYLE, G. (1960). Letters and Syllables in Plato. *Philosophical Review*, 69, pp. 431–51.

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

STERN, P. (2008). *Knowledge and Politics in Plato's* Theaetetus. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

CHAPTER 12

Knowledge, Opinion, and Recollection in the *Theaetetus*

Franco Trabattoni

1

At the end of the first section of the *Theaetetus*, when the two speakers have finally ascertained that – as Socrates puts it – «sense perception and knowledge (αἴσθησις τε καὶ ἐπιστήμη) can never be the same thing», Socrates suggests that they search for an answer

> not in the domain of sense perception but in that other one – whatever it may be called – which occupies the soul when it is engaged alone with that which exists.[1] (μὴ ζητεῖν αὐτὴν ἐν αἰσθήσει τὸ παράπαν ἀλλ' ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ ὀνόματι, ὅτι ποτ' ἔχει ἡ ψυχή, ὅταν αὐτὴ καθ' αὑτὴν πραγματεύηται περὶ τὰ ὄντα.)
>
> *Theaet.* 187a3–6

Theaetetus replies that, in his view, what Socrates is talking about is called opining (δοξάζειν, 187a8). As Socrates explicitly approves of this conclusion (Ὀρθῶς γὰρ οἴει, ὦ φίλε, 187a9), Theaetetus has good reasons to believe that the path of δόξα and δοξάζειν is a valid alternative to find a better definition of ἐπιστήμη than the one examined until then. Therefore, he suggests identifying ἐπιστήμη with right opinion (ἡ ἀληθὴς δόξα ἐπιστήμη εἶναι, 187ab 6–7).

This passage has led many readers to suggest that Plato intentionally keeps the enquiry within the boundaries of sensible knowledge, thereby paving the way for the inevitably aporetic outcome of the dialogue.[2] Not only is the clear superiority of ἐπιστήμη over δόξα confirmed by several passages in the Platonic corpus, but in some specific passages ἐπιστήμη and δόξα are set in contrast as

---

1 The translation is mine (based on Andrea Capra's Italian translation in TRABATTONI 2016a).

2 This interpretation is usually traced back to CORNFORD (1935). It has found numerous supporters, most recently: SEDLEY (2004); FERRARI (2011). Sedley maintains that in the *Theaetetus* Plato wishes to expound only teachings compatible with the Socrates of the early dialogues; Ferrari instead believes that the dialogue has an intentionally "peirastic-zetetic" character (FERRARI 2011, p. 141).

"infallible knowledge" and "fallible knowledge".[3] Besides, there is no reason why this rule ought not to apply to the ἐπιστήμη whose definition is sought in the *Theaetetus*, particularly since at the beginning of the investigation – to avoid possible misunderstandings – Socrates has Theaetetus grant that the ἐπιστήμη in question can be identified with σοφία, which is to say the form of knowledge that undoubtedly occupies the highest place for Plato (145de). In the light of all this, it seems evident that the attempt to verify whether ἐπιστήμη might somehow coincide with δόξα (even correct δόξα) is destined to fail from the start.

However, a careful reading of the passage under investigation reveals the untenability of the interpretation I have just outlined (and which we might call the standard interpretation). Indeed, δόξα here cannot coincide with "sensible knowledge" – as would instead appear to be the case in other Platonic passages (especially the metaphor of the divided line in Book 6 of the *Republic*). If δόξα is introduced as an alternative to αἴσθησις, it is obvious that this δόξα cannot have anything to do with αἴσθησις itself. Indeed, Plato is particularly peremptory in pointing out to the reader that from this moment onward sense perception will be completely ruled out from the possible definitions of ἐπιστήμη: in addition to the above-quoted words by Socrates, which are unambiguous enough in themselves, we have those equally resolute by Theaetetus: «now it has become most clear that knowledge is something different from sense perception» (186e).

These observations are enough, in my view, to undermine the validity of the standard interpretation.[4] But nor can it be argued – as some scholars have done[5] – that the topic of δόξα is erroneously introduced by Theaetetus because he is incapable of correctly following Socrates' footsteps (which ought to have led him towards ἐπιστήμη as the knowledge of forms), and that Socrates only gives his assent because he is pursuing a certain maieutic and educational approach in dealing with the young mathematician. Indeed, an allusion to a certain kind of δόξα is already present in Socrates' previous sentence, although the word is not used yet. The reason why Theaetetus immediately states that

---

3 Cf. *Men.* 91b, *Resp.* 477e.

4 Obviously, it may be contended that the rule of excluding sense perception, which is here affirmed in principle, is subsequently not respected in practice, for reasons that have to do with the rhetorical and communicative strategy of the dialogue. But, actually, no proof adduced in support of this interpretation is really convincing. Since I cannot dwell on this point here, I will refer to TRABATTONI (2016a), *Introduzione*, pp. CXLII–CXLIII, which also offers further arguments against the Cornfordian and neo-Cornfordian interpretation of the dialogue.

5 See NARCY 2000.

what Socrates is talking about is δοξάζειν, and why Socrates assents to this, does not lie in his personal (and erroneous) way of interpreting Socrates' words; rather, it lies in the fact that the reference to δοξάζειν is the most obvious and evident interpretation of such words. In other terms, Socrates really *was* alluding to δοξάζειν, Theaetetus – being the bright fellow he is – immediately guesses it, and Socrates then obviously gives his assent, as though to say: "Clever boy, you got it!".

We can infer that this is how things stand through a careful analysis of the passage. According to the "normalising" interpretation of this turning point in the *Theaetetus*, we would expect the investigation here to stop focusing on sensible things – that is, external objects of which there can be no ἐπιστήμη for well-known reasons – in order to turn towards other, equally external objects, namely the forms. These are objects of which there *can* be ἐπιστήμη since, unlike sensible objects, they are ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὡσαύτως ὄντα (*Resp*. 479e7–8).[6] Socrates instead states something quite different: the path he traces to overcome the impasse of αἴσθησις does not consist in passing from one *external object* (sensibles) to another *external object* (the forms), but rather in passing *from the outside to the inside*, which is to say: from the attempt to find knowledge in a given external object to the attempt to find knowledge in the operations that the soul performs within itself when it reflects on that which exists (τὰ ὄντα).

In my view, this reference to τὰ ὄντα clearly shows that Socrates' words do not mark any surprising deviation towards "non-Platonic" paths which, as such, require elaborate and often misleading justifications; rather, Socrates' words are the natural and direct outcome of what comes before. Αἴσθησις had proven to be an ineffective solution because it was incapable of reaching truth and being (186c8). Being and truth must be understood here in their full sense, as referring to those self-identical and unchanging aspects of reality that Socrates had called *koinà*. If it is necessary for ἐπιστήμη to have a stable and in no way relative object, it is equally necessary that its object be the universal (the common feature which always remains the same despite the passing of everything else), and not the particular. But the transition from the particular to the universal immediately reveals a crucial difference that Socrates underlines precisely (yet not exclusively) in the words I am discussing here. While sense perception imposes itself from the outside upon a passive subject who has no influence over it, knowledge of the universal only emerges through the active operations that the soul performs when it turns to the external world.

6 But see also *Phaedo* 79d6, *Resp*. 479a2, *Soph*. 248a12, *Soph*. 249b12, *Pol*. 269d5, *Phil*. 59 c4, *Phil*. 61e3.

In other words, while it is enough to open our eyes to automatically see the whiteness of the wall before us, and while it is enough to keep our ears open to hear the voice of a friend calling us, universal and common features do not impose themselves upon the soul in an equally automatic way: they can only be recognised through an active operation of the mind. In order to recognise common features, then, it is not enough to have an alert mind, but it is necessary for the soul to actively carry out a whole series of comparisons, to identify differences and similarities. Only after it has actively performed these operations, can the soul recognise – in addition to the red-I-am-perceiving-now – also "red" or "colour" in general. Red and colour in general are not perceived in an immediate way, as is shown by the fact that according to many people they do not exist at all.[7]

But if this is the case, it is evident why δόξα and δοξάζειν must necessarily come into play: because that which does not strike our sense organs immediately, but is inferred via reflection, is subject to judgement (which is what δόξα means in this passage), to assess whether reflection has operated in the correct way or not. Since what I see is not man, but Socrates and Callias, the "nature of man" is always bound to be an object of opinion/judgement. In order to understand what man is, and likewise any other general notion, we cannot rely on any direct and incontrovertible contact with an external object, but only on our activity of reflecting on the things that are, of formulating hypotheses, *logoi*, and judgements, of reasoning within ourselves in various ways. All this is precisely what Socrates and Theaetetus call δόξα.

2

Once we have established all this, we can also understand why the enquiry concerning right opinion is neither meaningless nor useless. Sense perception is not ἐπιστήμη not so much because it is fallible – after all, upon closer scrutiny it turns out not to be fallible at all[8] – but because its object is the particular. From this we may infer that it is only possible to speak of ἐπιστήμη if the object of knowledge is universal. But knowledge of the universal, as we have just seen, does not present the faculties of knowledge with an object that is immediately perceivable, as is instead the case with sense perception. Rather, this is a kind of mediated knowledge. In the *Theaetetus* this mediation is

7 Cf. e.g. *Resp.* 478e–479a, or *Soph.* 246ab.

8 Several passages of the dialogue, including 152c and 160d, make it quite clear that sense perception is by its very nature infallible. See BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 8, 11; IOPPOLO 1999, p. 226, n. 51; MCCOY (2005), p. 23.

represented by δόξα, which is to say the soul's inner reflection on reality. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, this role is played by *logoi*, which in the metaphor of the second sailing[9] have the same mediating function as is attributed to δόξα in the *Theaetetus*. Indeed, if understood as "judgement", δόξα is strictly connected with *logos*, to the point of almost becoming confused with it, as is clear from the following *Theaetetus* passage:

> So much so that in my view the formulating of opinions (δοξάζειν) is a kind of speaking (λέγειν), and opinion (δόξαν) is a speech (λόγον) which is held neither with another person nor aloud, but with oneself and in silence.
>
> *Theaet.* 190a4–6

If the interposition of δόξα does not have the immediate effect of discarding the definition and of making any analysis of it useless, this is because – as already noted – δόξα here means "judgement". Therefore, as we have seen in the passage just quoted, it is closely connected with *logos*.[10] The enquiry thus continues in order to assess the possibility for human beings to achieve – through δόξα (judgement) and *logos* – a standard of knowledge that meets the requirement set by ἐπιστήμη: in short, to formulate judgements (δόξαι and *logoi*) that are certain and infallible.

This is precisely the aim of the immediately following enquiry, concerning false opinion. It is obvious that anyone who struggles to understand why Plato might wish to consider something which ultimately has the nature of δόξα as a candidate for the role of ἐπιστήμη, will struggle even more to understand why Plato focuses not on right opinion, but on the conditions of possibility for false opinion. The fact is that Plato here sets out to demonstrate his assumption not in a direct way, but rather – as he often chooses to do – through a dialectical and reverse procedure. False opinion is problematic because it appears to be both a form of knowledge (insofar as it is an opinion) and a form of non-knowledge (insofar as it is false). Indeed, it is either one or the other: either there is knowledge, in which case there cannot be falsehood and error; or falsehood and error are inevitable, in which case there is no knowledge. There is no knowledge, in the *Theaetetus*' terms, if this is understood as ἐπιστήμη, namely as knowledge without the risk and possibility of error. This means that the only real possibility to find something like ἐπιστήμη anywhere is to identify an unfettered realm within man's faculties of knowledge in which judgement

9 Since I cannot further explore this analogy, to which I will be returning later on, I will refer to TRABATTONI (2011), pp. LXVIII–LXXII, and TRABATTONI (2019).

10 For an in-depth discussion of this connection, see TRABATTONI 2016b, Ch. 5 (pp. 65–94).

and *logos* would be infallible. The lengthy enquiry about false opinion is precisely intended to show – through an evident climax – that this endeavour is destined to fail.

The analysis of false opinion is carried out through five steps.[11] The first three attempt to define false opinion, respectively, as confusion between knowledge and non-knowledge, as confusion between being and non-being, and as *allodoxia*. None of them succeed in the task, for one very simple reason. While false opinion is evidently a middle condition between knowledge and non-knowledge, the three arguments in question are based on the premise that intermediate states must not be taken into account (188a). Because of the failure of the enquiry conducted according to this provision, Socrates decides to suspend it (191ab), thereby allowing the research to continue through the metaphors of the "wax tablet" and the "aviary", which are designed precisely to account for that typical intermediate nature which is the distinguishing feature of false opinion. In the former case, the mean in question is produced by the lack of agreement between intellect and sense perception. According to more than one commentator,[12] this is the only firmly established point in the whole dialogue – and, at least from a formal perspective, this is a correct assessment. But, unfortunately, the outcome in question is not enough to solve the problem under investigation. Socrates notes that falsehood and error are possible even when the only faculty involved is the intellect (the example is 5 + 7 = 11). Socrates, therefore, moves on to analyse this case, resorting to the metaphor of the aviary. The mean between knowing and non-knowing, which is crucial in order to account for error and falsehood, is here identified in the difference between potential knowledge and actual knowledge. Yet not even in this case do we reach a positive outcome. Socrates observes that the solution found is only apparent, since the enquiry has run up against a bigger problem:

> someone who has knowledge of a certain thing will find himself being ignorant of this very thing, not through ignorance but through his knowledge (τινος ἔχοντα ἐπιστήμην τοῦτο αὐτὸ ἀγνοεῖν, μὴ ἀγνωμοσύνῃ ἀλλὰ τῇ ἑαυτοῦ ἐπιστήμῃ); we then have false opinion and the exchange of objects: is it not absurd that the soul, in the presence of knowledge (ἐπιστήμης παραγενομένης), knows nothing but is ignorant of everything? According to this argument, there is nothing to prevent ignorance too, when it is present (ἄγνοιαν παραγενομένην), from making us know something and

11 I will refer here to the enquiry I have carried out in TRABATTONI (2016a), pp. CII–CXXVIII and the notes *ad loc.*

12 See e.g. NARCY (2013).

> blindness from making us see, if it is true that sometimes knowledge makes us ignorant.
>
> *Theaet.* 199d1–8

As rightly emphasised in the translation, the «biggest» problem lies in the fact that even in the example of the aviary error will emerge in relation to knowledge that is *possessed* (ἔχοντα ἐπιστήμην) and which is *present* (ἐπιστήμης παραγενομένης). The illusion thus vanishes that falsehood and error may stem from the interference of two temporally different moments: the past moment represented by potential knowledge (the virtual possession of the birds in the aviary) and the current moment represented by present knowledge (the bird someone presently holds in his hands). The difference between potential knowledge and actual knowledge is enough to explain how error comes about, but not how the corresponding δόξα is generated, which is to say the psychological condition which emerges after the error in grasping has been made, whereby one currently believes that 11 is 12. The conclusion to which the analysis inevitably leads is that even in the case of the highest form of knowledge – the least clouded by omissions, interferences and contamination with sense perception, which is to say pure intellectual knowledge of a simple mathematical object – there is no absolute guarantee of avoiding falsehood and error.

At this stage, the aim of the whole enquiry about false opinion is quite clear. Alongside the acknowledgement that it is impossible to absolutely avoid all errors, the passage just quoted also reveals the condition of possibility for this state of affairs. The reason why error seems impossible is the supposition that the object with regard to which one is mistaken is known (ἔχοντα ἐπιστήμην, ἐπιστήμης παραγενομένης). How – Socrates asks – can we be wrong because of what is *our own* knowledge (τῇ *ἑαυτοῦ* ἐπιστήμῃ)? The dialectical solution to this dilemma is easy enough to find: if the assumption that error is possible cannot be refuted even in the most favourable case of all (pure intellection, what's more in relation to a very simple object), then it will be necessary to refute the assumption that we truly possess knowledge of this intelligible object.[13] And if we do not possess such knowledge even in this case, then we must conclude that the kind of ἐπιστήμη that meets the high standard set by

13 This perfectly agrees with *Phaedo* 65a–68c, where in order to clarify what kind of knowledge human beings can hope to attain, if only after death (66e4–6), Socrates explicitly speaks of possession, making repeated use of the verb κτάομαι (66a6, 67b7, 66c10, 66e8) and of the noun κτῆσις (65a9, 66c9) within a few lines. See TRABATTONI (2015).

the enquiry launched in the *Theaetetus* (i.e. certain and infallible knowledge of intelligible and universal things) is not really accessible to man.

3

Nevertheless, the outcome is not complete failure. At this point in the dialogue, the research takes two different directions: on the one hand, in the light of the limitations that have emerged, it will be a matter of explaining what kind of human knowledge comes closest to meeting the requirements of ἐπιστήμη; on the other hand, it will be a matter of defining what features the ἐπιστήμη unattainable by man must possess, showing why it lies beyond human reach. The first trajectory is best exemplified by the third definition of ἐπιστήμη proposed by Theaetetus, namely «right opinion accompanied by *logos*». This definition too is refuted because, insofar as it is compromised by δόξα and *logos*, it cannot meet the infallibility standard set for ἐπιστήμη. However, as T. Chappell has rightly observed, it expresses a notion of knowledge that Plato accepts in various ways and in several passages.[14] But the same outcome can also be inferred from the way in which Theaetetus frames the follow-up of the discussion.

Theaetetus has understood perfectly well that the knowledge sought must be infallible, even though it cannot but have the nature of δόξα; and, through an analysis of false opinion, he has also found that there is no human way of knowing that is completely free from the possibility of error. Still, this does not prevent him from regarding the last definition he has proposed as acceptable, namely the definition of knowledge as right opinion. Indeed, he explains that «true opinion is not subject to error» (ἀναμάρτητόν γέ πού ἐστιν τὸ δοξάζειν ἀληθῆ, 200e4–5). Theaetetus evidently wishes to suggest that true opinion is not subject to error simply because it is true: fallibility is an attribute of the knowing subjects, insofar as they can have both true and false opinions; it is not an attribute of true opinion, which, insofar as it is true, cannot of course be also false. Through his definition, Theaetetus believes to have identified the only way in which human knowledge can be said to be in some way infallible, compatibly with the unavoidable fallibility of opinion: human knowledge is infallible to the same degree (be it large or small) to which a true opinion can be infallible, and that is to say: when it is true and for as long as it remains true.

Socrates, however, does not accept this proposal, and finally sets out to refute it. The reason for this refutation is not that a higher, or more infallible, kind of knowledge than true opinion is available to man (particularly if this

14 Here are the relevant correspondences identified by Chappell: *Men.* 92a, *Phaedo* 76b, 97d–99-d, *Symp.* 202a, *Resp.* 534b, *Tim.* 51e (CHAPPELL 2005, pp. 199–200).

true opinion is supported by *logos*, as the third definition entails). The reason, instead, is that according to Plato the truth and (partial) infallibility of this kind of knowledge depends on absolute truth and irrefutability, which must necessarily be assumed as their condition of possibility, even if this dimension is not truly attainable by human nature. This is the second of the two trajectories I have mentioned above. Plato carefully conceals it between the lines, and indeed almost all commentators have missed it. Yet, it is here that we find what the speakers have been looking for in vain throughout the dialogue, namely the Platonic answer to the question "What is ἐπιστήμη?"

Plato made sure to insert into his text a significant clue, the importance of which has again been largely overlooked by commentators. Just after Theaetetus has newly presented his definition, and just before Socrates' refutation implicitly reveals the correct answer, Socrates significantly observes:

> if we continue investigating, we might stumble across what we are looking for. (καὶ τοῦτο ἐὰν ἰόντες ἐρευνῶμεν, τάχ' ἂν ἐμπόδιον γενόμενον αὐτὸ φήνειεν τὸ ζητούμενον).
>
> *Theaet.* 200e8–201a1

Through Socrates' words, Plato warns the reader that the solution might lie in something which we seem to come across when we least expect it – as though we were simply stumbling across it. Clearly, the aim is to draw our attention to the possibility that what we are looking for might lie on a secondary path – more or less as when we are looking for some item everywhere in the house and suddenly trip over it. This is exactly what happens in the refutation of the second definition suggested by Theatetus (ἐπιστήμη = right opinion), which Socrates achieves through the example of judges and a law court. The moment his definition is refuted, which is to say in what seems to be the least likely context, Theaetetus is about to come across a suitable answer; and, obviously, he does not realise it. But Plato hopes that Socrates' warning will at least have some effect on the reader.

4

Socrates' argument is a very simple one.[15] If we grant that judges in a law court can develop a right opinion of the crime they must deliberate about even though they have not witnessed it, we must conclude that these judges have

15 For a more extensive discussion of the metaphor of the judges and witnesses in a law court, and a survey of the literature on the topic, TRABATTONI 2016b, Ch. 3 (pp. 31–46).

right opinion but not knowledge. Therefore, this case shows that right opinion and knowledge cannot be the same thing (201c). This refutation is rather unusual compared to the standard way in which Socratic *elenchos* unfolds. Whereas Socrates usually only contradicts his interlocutor's thesis, without the correct solution playing any role in the argumentation, this is precisely what happens in the case under discussion: Socrates manages to show that right opinion is not knowledge only by showing that it is defective in relation to something that in his view undoubtedly qualifies as knowledge, namely the direct knowledge possessed by the witnesses who have seen the facts (ἰδόντι μόνον ἔστιν εἰδέναι, 201b8). However, we might wish to interpret this passage, it is clear that according to Socrates direct vision is an unquestionable example of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), without any need to offer Theaetetus an explanation for this (and without Theaetetus expressing any doubts or asking any questions).

Some critics have interpreted this passage as an unlikely appreciation of sensible knowledge on Socrates' part, and have attempted to justify it in some way.[16] But it is a highly implausible hypothesis. The case of the law court is a metaphor; therefore, the direct knowledge possessed by the witnesses must not be taken literally, to mean sensible knowledge, but must rather be regarded as a metaphor for direct knowledge of an object, of whatever sort it might be. Here too we find a perfect analogy with the difference – discussed in the *Phaedo* – between the first and the second sailing: even though the first sailing undoubtedly has sensible reality as its destination, the difference marked by the metaphor lies not in the fact that the first has the sensible as its object while the second has the intelligible, but rather in the fact that the former has a direct nature while the latter has a mediated nature (mediated, that is, by *logoi* in the *Phaedo*, just as it is mediated by δόξα in the *Theaetetus*).

The metaphor of the law court thus clarifies what the necessary condition is in order for any kind of knowledge to be defined as truly infallible according to Plato. The condition is that it be a direct, and not mediated, form of knowledge. If, as is in the *Phaedo* and *Theaetetus*, *logos* and δόξα slip in as intermediaries between the knowing subject and the object known, then the condition of infallibility is inevitably lost. *Logos* is only true if it correctly describes its object, and this correspondence is never guaranteed a priori, since the very truth of *logos* is subject to the judgement of δόξα (the activity of reflection

---

16 See e.g. MCDOWELL (1973), pp. 227–228; BURNYEAT (1990), p. 127; GILL (2003), p. 166; CHAPPELL (2005), p. 194.

which the soul carries out within itself, as discussed by Socrates in 187a), which is fallible by nature.[17]

If we now return to the *Theaetetus* passage in which Socrates rejects the definition of knowledge as sense perception, we can see how this marks a crucial turning point not only for the dialogue but for Platonic epistemology and metaphysics in general. The sought-for ἐπιστήμη must meet two equally necessary criteria: 1) it must be infallible; 2) it must have the universal rather than the particular as its object. Sense perception can meet the former criterion, but not the latter. Intellectual knowledge, for which the soul is responsible, undoubtedly meets the latter criterion. But if it is an indirect form of knowledge, mediated by *logos* and δόξα, then for the aforementioned reasons it cannot meet the former criterion. The only possibility left, then, is the one evoked by the metaphor of the law court, namely that there exists a direct form of knowledge of the universal comparable to the one possessed by eyewitnesses of a crime, and structurally identical to knowledge of sensible reality. However, the analysis of false opinion has ultimately shown that this is not a viable path: as the aviary metaphor has made clear, error can even creep into what the knowing subject tends to regard as the unquestionable and complete knowledge of an intelligible object. This shows that man currently possesses no direct and intuitive knowledge of the universal (hence, following the parallel argument in the *Phaedo*, a "second sailing" becomes inevitable).

Although intuitive knowledge of the universal is unattainable, according to Plato it can in no way be excluded from the picture of a correct epistemological doctrine. The veracity of indirect knowledge – be it opinion, *logos*, or any kind of description – implies the conformity of the image to its object.[18] Therefore, it assumes direct knowledge of the object as the origin and verification of the veracity of all the images and forms of indirect knowledge deriving from it. But because this knowledge is currently unavailable, we can only postulate its realisation in the past, in accordance with the doctrine of recollection.

The doctrine of recollection is not formally present in the *Theaetetus*. Yet, several passages allude to it as the implicit framework of reference to resolve problems for which the dialogue would appear to offer no solution. One of these passages is precisely the metaphor of the law court. The judges question the witnesses, who in turn must recall what they are not seeing at present,

17 Plato explicitly describes δόξα as such in *Soph*. 263d (where, significantly for the argument I have been presenting, διάνοια too is associated with the set of faculties open to the truth/falsehood variable).

18 As it may be inferred from the *Cratylus*, according to Plato language itself is an image (or imitation) of the reality we seek to describe. See TRABATTONI (2016b), Ch. 7, pp. 111–138.

but which they once saw in the past. And this is precisely how the Platonic Socrates behaves when he questions other people's souls following the thread of maieutics, which Plato extends to recollection, precisely because all human souls are eyewitnesses to the truth (as the myth of *Phaedrus* 249b states, only the souls which have "seen" the forms in the *hyperouranion topos* can reincarnate into human beings).

More generally, the doctrine of recollection is present in the *Theaetetus* as the condition of possibility of that intermediate form of knowing which combines knowledge and non-knowledge, and which presents itself as unavoidable throughout the dialogue, ultimately sealing its aporetic outcome. Consider, for instance, the important passage that Plato inserts between the wax tablet and the aviary metaphors:

> Then is it not shameless that, when we are ignorant of what knowledge is, we try to clarify the *act* of knowing in its various features? Besides, Theaetetus, we have long been engaging in an impure kind of discussion. Countless times we have said things like "we know", "we do not know", "we have knowledge", and "we do not have knowledge", as though we understood what we were saying, while we are still ignorant of knowledge. For example, even now, at this very moment, we have used the terms "be ignorant" and "understand" as though we had any right to use them, even though we are deprived of knowledge.
>
> *Theaet.* 196e–197a

This passage closely recalls the beginning of the *Meno*, as here too Socrates seems to be alluding to what the literature refers to as the "principle of the priority of definition". But the *Theaetetus* passage clarifies what in the *Meno* can only be inferred via interpretation. Socrates does not invoke the priority of definition in order to claim that we can only find out the features of a thing once we have defined it: His aim, instead, is to show that we should search some account for the odd situation described in the passage just quoted: we can sensibly speak of a thing in such a way not only to allow our interlocutors to understand us, but also to add conclusions that are approximately and probably true, *even though we do not possess its definition*. This condition is precisely the doctrine of recollection. According to Plato, this theory is the necessary and sufficient condition for the fact that, as regards the knowledge of universal things, men find themselves in an intermediate condition between absolute ignorance and infallible knowledge: the former is disproved by the very undertaking of the enquiry enacted in the Theatetus; the latter is shown

to be impossible by the fact that no occurrences of it can be found, even if we take the most elementary cases into consideration.

References

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The 'Theaetetus' of Plato* (Introduction). Hackett. Indianapolis.

CHAPPELL, T. (2005). *Reading Plato's "Theaetetus"*. Hackett. Indianapolis.

CORNFORD, F.M.D. (1935). *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London.

FERRARI, F. (2011). *Platone, Teeteto*. BUR. Milano.

GILL, M.L. (2003). Why Does *Theaetetus*' Final Definition of Knowledge Fail?. In: DETEL, W.; BECKER, A.; SCHOLZ, A. (eds.) (2003). *Ideal and Culture of Knowledge in Plato*. Steiner. Stuttgart, pp. 159–173.

IOPPOLO, A.M. (ed.) (1999). *Platone, Teeteto*. Laterza. Roma-Bari.

MCCOY, M. (2005). Reason and Dialectic in the Argument against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 45, pp. 21–39.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato, Theaetetus*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

NARCY, M. (2000). *Doxazein*: "opinare" o "giudicare". In: CASERTANO, G. (ed.). *Il "Teeteto" di Platone. Strutture e problmatiche*. Loffredo. Napoli, pp. 7–23.

NARCY, M. (2013). Pourquoi l'erreur?. In: EL MURR, D. (ed.). *La mesure du sovoir: études sur le "Théétète" de Platon*. Vrin. Paris.

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato's* Theaetetus. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

TRABATTONI, F. (2011). *Platone,* Fedone. Einaudi. Torino.

TRABATTONI, F. (2015). Fedone *65a–68c: possibilità e limiti della filosofia*. In: CARDULLO, L.; IOZZIA, D. (eds.). ΚΑΛΛΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΡΕΤΗ, *Bellezza e Virtù. Studi in onore di Maria Barbanti*. Bonanno. Catania, pp. 191–204.

TRABATTONI, F. (2016a). *Platone, Teeteto*. Einaudi. Torino.

TRABATTONI, F. (2016b). *Essays on Plato's Epistemology*. Leuven University Press. Leuven.

TRABATTONI, F. (2019). La "prima navigazione" nel *Fedone*. In: CORNELLI, G.; ROBINSON, TH.; BRAVO, F. (eds.). *Plato's* Phaedo. Academia Verlag. Sankt Augustin, pp. 344–352.

CHAPTER 13

The *Theaetetus* on the Proper Use of Scientific Elements

Naly Thaler

1 *Stoicheia* and the Puzzle about Their Knowability

The notion of a *stoicheion* in the sense of an element of reality appears in the course of the examination of Theaetetus' third and final definition of knowledge, which takes it to consist in true belief with the addition of a *logos* (201c8–d3). Socrates associates this definition with a highly specific theory, the so-called "dream theory", which cashes out the notion of an account and its relation to knowledge with the claim that ordinary everyday objects, literally "we and everything else" are composed of elements (τὰ μὲν πρῶτα οἱονπερεὶ στοιχεῖα ἐξ ὧν ἡμεῖς τε συγκείμεθα καὶ τἆλλα 201e1–2), and that knowledge of each of these objects resides in the ability to provide a comprehensive account consisting of the names of its constituent elements. Along with this claim, the theory is also committed to the idea that anything of which it is impossible to give an account cannot be known (202c2–3). Since the theory defines an account of X as a comprehensive list of the names of its constituent elements (ὀνομάτων γὰρ συμπλοκὴν εἶναι λόγου οὐσίαν 202b5), it turns out that the elements themselves, which are by stipulation simple and so cannot receive an account (201e1–2), cannot be known.

The bulk of Socrates' discussion of elements and how their grasp enables one to possess knowledge appears in course of his refutation of this last commitment regarding the asymmetry of knowledge between elements and complexes (203a1–205e7). The refutation uses the relation between letters and syllables as a model for the relation between elements and complexes (in fact, at 202e6–7 Socrates claims that the dream theorist must have used the alphabet as a paradigm for his theory), and shows that examining this model provides us with overwhelming reasons for thinking that it is incoherent to hold that complexes can be known if their elements are unknowable. Specifically, the refutation proceeds by arguing that there are two possible kinds of relation between a complex and its parts, namely, (a) that where the complex constitutes an "all" or "sum" of its parts, in which case it is simply identical to them, and (b) that where the complex constitutes a "whole", in which case it is a single entity,

different from its parts, that comes into being when these parts are brought together. When applied to the letters and syllables paradigm, the dichotomy yields the following result: if the syllable SO is construed as a "sum" or "all", the property of 'being knowable' which is true of it must be true of both S and O together. Yet if both S and O together are knowable, each of them must be. This has the consequence that letters are no less knowable than their syllables. Alternatively, if the syllable SO is construed as a "whole" then, since it is single thing distinct from its letters (and since these letters are the only conceivable parts the syllable might have), by the theory's own stipulated definition of what an account is it cannot receive an account and, by the theory's own stipulation that accounts are necessary for knowledge, cannot be known.

Socrates' refutation of the dream theory's asymmetry claim has received a substantial amount of scholarly attention. Since the dream theory is committed to several theses regarding the necessary conditions for knowledge, and since Socrates in effect shows that these claims taken together are inimical to the idea that reality can be known, scholars have been at pains to discern which of the theory's claims Plato would choose to accept, and which he would reject – under the natural assumption that he does in fact consider knowledge of reality to be attainable and worth striving for. Scholars commonly assume that Plato in fact takes knowledge of elements to be necessary for and somehow prior to knowledge of complexes, yet are at odds about whether he accepts the theory's claim that all knowledge requires an account[1] and, assuming a positive answer to this last question, what sort of account this might be.[2]

While I shall later deal directly with these questions, I would like to begin my discussion of the relation between the notion of elements and the idea of a knowledge-conveying account by pointing out a feature of Socrates' refutation of the theory's asymmetry thesis which has not received much attention. This is the fact that while the argument purportedly proves that it is incoherent to hold that knowledge of the syllable is possible if knowledge of its letters is not, it nevertheless fails to provide any account of the sense in which an analysis of a syllable into its constituent letters would amount to an epistemic failure if its letters remain unknown. The argument merely forces us to accept the logical conclusion that even if one were able to properly spell the syllable SO, as long as the grasp they have of the letters S and O does not amount to knowledge of

1 For discussions of whether Plato stands behind the claim that all knowledge requires an account see CROMBIE (1963), pp. 113–117; WHITE (1976), pp. 178–9. RUNCINMAN (1962), p. 40 claims that the moral of the refutation is that knowledge of elements is attained by direct intuition.

2 For two conflicting answers to this question see FINE (1979); NEHAMAS (1984).

them, the account of the syllable will fail to constitute knowledge of it. Yet we are told nothing about what the ramifications of spelling a syllable in such a non-knowledgeable manner are, and how they differ from those that would ensue from an epistemically pristine spelling of it, one that does rely on knowledge of its letters.

I wish to suggest that while Socrates' argument against the dream theory's asymmetry thesis leaves us in the dark regarding this issue, the dialogue does in fact return to treat it at a later stage in the discussion. This elaboration, I suggest, is to be found in Socrates' examination of the second of the three suggested alternatives at 206e5–208b12 for how to understand the notion of "*logos*" in Theaetetus' original definition of knowledge as "true belief with the addition of a *logos*".[3] This second suggestion consists in the idea that the notion of *logos* should be cashed out as «being able to give anyone who asks what something is an answer in terms of elements» (206e7–207a1). Socrates proceeds to provide two examples in order to illustrate his meaning. The first comes from the realm of craft: Socrates claims that lay-people such as himself and Theaetetus, when asked what a wagon is, can name only its most obvious or familiar parts, such as its wheels, axle, yoke, and body; in contrast to this, experts in cart-building have the ability to name all of the wagon's 100 parts, or "planks" as Hesiod has it (207a3–7; b8–c3). Socrates then illustrates the same idea using the already familiar spelling paradigm: he claims that according to this suggestion for interpreting how the notion of a *logos* figures in the concept of knowledge, having mere true belief (as is available to laymen) about the name "Theaetetus" would consist in the ability to refer to it via its syllables; whereas a knowledgeable grasp of that same name would consist in the ability to break down these syllables and name their constituent letters (207a9–b6).[4]

But no sooner is this suggestion for how to understand the notion of *logos* in the third definition of knowledge brought forward, Socrates exposes what he takes to be a glaring inadequacy in it. He begins by providing a highly abstract description of the inadequacy, and then fleshes out its sense by invoking Theaetetus' past experience as a novice in the art of spelling. The abstract description is as follows:

---

3 That the discussion of the second suggestion deals with the issue of knowledge of letters was suggested by Bostock (1990), pp. 222–225 who considered his suggestion to be speculative. In what follows I shall try to offer substantial reasons for thinking that Bostock's suggestion is correct.

4 Note that since referring to the name via its syllables here presupposes that the student does not know how to spell the syllables themselves, we must assume that the reference to each of them occurs vocally, i.e. that the student is able to sound each syllable separately.

> And do you at the same time think that a man has knowledge of anything when he believes (a) the same thing now to be part of one thing and now part of something else? Or when (b) he judges that now one thing and now something different belongs to one and the same object?
>
> *Theaet.* 207d3–6, trans. LEVETT

Socrates then reminds Theaetetus that this general description of what will strike anyone as a case of epistemic inadequacy corresponds exactly to his own experience as a student of letters: as both he and Theaetetus agree, beginners in spelling tend to make the following two sorts of mistake prior to gaining a full mastery of the field:

(a) after correctly applying a letter to a given syllable, they go on to apply a different letter to the same syllable (presumably, when it appears in a different word) (207d10–e1; 207e7–208a3);

or

(b) after correctly applying a letter to a given syllable, they go on to apply that same letter to a syllable where it does not belong (207e1–3).

As Theaetetus acknowledges, a student who is liable to make these kinds of mistakes does not have knowledge of the first syllable of Theaetetus' name, even though he has spelt it correctly. And since nothing prevents such a student from being in the same state regarding the other syllables of that name, it turns out that although he is able to specify all its syllables and, in addition, provide an account of each of them in terms of its letters, he nevertheless does not have knowledge of it. Thus, it turns out that if "account" is taken in the sense of an analysis into constituent elements, one can have true belief with the addition of an account regarding some object, yet may nevertheless lack knowledge of it.

Why is the refutation of Theaetetus' second suggestion a return to the problem of knowledge of elements which had earlier plagued the dream theory? That this is in fact the issue in question might be obscured by the fact that the grammatical scenario Socrates devotes his attention to is the one depicted in (a) i.e. where the student spells a syllable correctly in one instance (in the name "Theaetetus") yet misspells it in another (in the name "Theodorus"). In addition, Socrates claims on the basis of this scenario that a student in this state cannot legitimately be said to have knowledge of the syllable "THE" (208a2–3). All this might lead one to suppose that the problem concerns first and foremost knowledge of syllables, not of letters.[5]

---

5 This is the reading adopted by MCDOWELL (1973), pp. 253–254; BURNYEAT (1990), pp. 213–215. SEDLEY (2004), pp. 171 takes the later discussion as dealing with a revised theory of

But, it is highly unlikely that this is the proper construal of the issue under consideration. First, when describing scenario (b) in 207e1–3 all Theaetetus says is that after applying the letter to some syllable in which it belongs, the student proceeds to misapply it to another. This description need not be taken as referring to a situation where, after properly spelling the name "Theaetetus" the student goes on to misapply the whole syllable "The", e.g. by spelling "Thelamōn" instead of "Telamōn"; the description is perfectly compatible with a case where after correctly spelling the name "Theaetetus", the student proceeds to write "rhēthōr" rather than "rhētōr".[6] And it is perfectly reasonable to treat such an error as an indication that the student who had properly spelt the name "Theaetetus" did not in fact perform that earlier task in a knowledgeable way.

Second, as Bostock notes,[7] even if we accept that scenario (b) involves the misapplication of Theta in conjunction with Epsilon, as in the case where the student writes "Thelamōn" rather than "Telamōn", getting rid of all errors of this particular kind would still not provide us with sufficient proof that he wrote the name "Theaetetus" with knowledge. We can imagine a scenario where the student in fact gets all the various instances of the syllable "THE" right, yet fails to spell other syllables where Theta belongs. Since, as we have said above, such mistakes provide good reasons to doubt that the student who was able to correctly spell "Theaetetus" did so on the basis of knowledge, it makes better sense to assume that Socrates is thinking about the wider case in which the letter Theta is misapplied, and not the limited one in which it is only misapplied in conjunction with Epsilon. If the more limited case is the one Socrates has in mind, he would thereby fail to alert Theaetetus to the general nature of the problem at hand, and would leave the door open the introduction of additional similar puzzles.

In addition to this, we have evidence outside the *Theaetetus* for Plato's interest in cases where a student is able to properly spell some syllables but not others, and in these cases it is quite clear that he has in mind the inconsistent application of individual letters and not whole syllables. Thus, for example, in *Statesman* 277e–278b the Eleatic Visitor claims that novice spellers are often in a position where they recognize a given letter in a short or easy syllable, yet fail to recognize it in more difficult combinations. Here, the discussion of how to attain knowledge of spelling clearly describes the novice state as one where

---

elements, one whose advance over the dream theory resides in its denial of the perceptibility of elements.

6 This is somewhat obscured by the original more abstract description of (b) in 207d3–6 which makes it look as if the student had mistakenly thought, e.g. that the syllable "TE" is the syllable "THE".

7 BOSTOCK (1990), pp. 224–225

the student identifies a given letter in one syllable, yet fails to recognize it in a *different* syllable (277b6–278a3). This is also the only way to read the visitor's description of the perfected state of being educated in letters. According to the visitor, this state is achieved when a student is able to recognize in regard to each of the letters that it is distinct from all the others, and the same as itself in all the various syllables where it occurs (ποιήσῃ τῶν στοιχείων ἕκαστον πάντων ἐν πάσαις ταῖς συλλαβαῖς τὸ μὲν ἕτερον ὡς τῶν ἄλλων ἕτερον ὄν, τὸ δὲ ταὐτὸν ὡς ταὐτὸν ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ἑαυτῷ προσαγορεύεσθαι, 278b5–c1).

If this is indeed the proper construal of the scenarios described in the *Theaetetus*' examination of the second suggestion for the meaning of *logos*, we can now apply it to the discussion of knowledge of elements which was conducted earlier in the context of the refutation of the dream theory's asymmetry claim. As we have seen, that refutation was based on general considerations of the logic of part-whole relations, showing in principle that if elements are unknowable, their unknowability must infect the complexes which are composed of them. Yet the refutation did not provide any account or elaboration of the nature of the presumed cognitive failure that would then ensue. In light of the above, I wish to suggest that here, in the examination of the second way for understanding the relevant notion of *logos*, we receive a concrete illustration of why knowledge of syllables is impossible when one does not also have knowledge of their constituent letters. Socrates invokes Theaetetus' own experience as a novice speller and applies to it common intuitions about the criteria for possessing knowledge, thus giving concrete substance to the thought that knowledge of letters is necessary in order for any grammatical analysis of a syllable to constitute a display of knowledge of *it*. The pressing question which both discussions raise is, therefore, what knowledge of letters consists in and how it is conducive to eliminating the practical problem of inconsistency in spelling syllables which plagues anyone who has failed to attain it.

2 Knowledge of Elements: the Familiar Model

In regard to this question, there is a suggestion which has gained considerable credence in the scholarly literature. This suggestion was originally introduced by Gail Fine as a way of addressing the puzzle used to refute the dream theory's asymmetry claim about the possibility of knowledge of complexes and elements.[8] The gist of this suggestion is that Plato does in fact take knowledge of letters to be necessary for knowledge of syllables, and that he also takes

8 FINE (1979) refers to this model as the 'interrelation model of knowledge'. She is closely followed by CHAPPELL (2004), p. 218.

this knowledge to be manifested in an account of them. Yet, pace what is presupposed by the dream theory, such an account does not require that letters have constituent parts: rather, according to Fine knowledge of letters consists in a systematic classification of them, one which appeals to their similarities and differences from each other in terms of their phonetic properties. Thus, for example, knowledge of Sigma would consist in recognizing that, like all consonants, it requires a vowel to be voiced yet, unlike some of them, such as Beta, it can be sounded on its own.[9] It turns out then that Theaetetus' definition of knowledge as true belief with the addition of an account is fully coherent. True belief resides in the ability to properly analyze syllables into letters; and this belief is transformed into knowledge once the student has acquired the additional ability to provide an account of the interrelations of the letters themselves.

For the purpose of what follows, I would like to classify Fine's suggestion under the general heading the "Underlying Knowledge model" (henceforth UKM). What I wish to convey by this title is the general fact that any theory of elemental knowledge that falls under it assumes that there are two complementing levels of facts that must be grasped in order for the student to reach a pristine epistemic state.[10] One level contains facts which pertain to the ostensible phenomena of the relevant field, e.g. to audible syllables, and is manifested in the ability to construe each of them by means of their relevant explanantia, i.e. the elements of the field, such as letters of the alphabet. The other level pertains to the explanantia themselves, and consists in the grasp of facts that are unique to them. Thus, the explanans, considered from a different angle, is itself an explanandum of sorts. And, importantly, the facts that are appealed to in order to account for this more basic explanandum are fully independent of the phenomena which constituted the original explanandum. According to UKM the *logoi* which constitute accounts of letters do not appeal to or even mention any of the specific combinations in which these letters are found.

9 FINE (1979), p. 380 takes this to be Plato's intent in having Theaetetus describe the impossibility of giving an account of Sigma, in 203b2–8. According to Fine these claims occur as part of a proto-classification of Sigma in terms of Genus and species.

10 Even reductionist readings of these passages, which deny the validity of the interrelation model and assume instead that Plato espouses the idea of direct cognition of the elements, can be subsumed under the general heading of UKM, as they too hold that knowledge of elements is prior to and independent of knowledge of complexes. For such a view see SEDLEY (2004), pp. 167–8; BOSTOCK (2000), pp. 219, 244. It is more convenient for my purposes to focus on the interrelation model as a representative of UKM since it is much more explicit than the 'direct cognition' model regarding what sort of facts about elements constitute knowledge of them.

These basic commitments of UKM about what knowledge of elements is like are shared both by Fine's suggestion and by the dream theory itself. The difference between them is that the Dream theory takes such 'underlying facts' about elements to require an analysis of them into further constituents, and so denies that knowledge of elements is in fact possible. Fine, on the other hand, takes such facts to be accessible without the need to analyze elements into further constituents, and so takes Plato to be committed to the possibility of knowledge of elements. According to her reading Plato is using these passages to alert us that what is required to achieve such knowledge is a more sophisticated version of UKM than the one proposed by the dream theory.

Now, if I am right in claiming that Socrates' argument against the second alternative for understanding the meaning of *logos* reopens the earlier question regarding knowledge of elements which proved the downfall of the dream theory, Fine's version of UKM should be applicable to that later discussion as well. In other words, the adverse practical ramifications of failing to possess knowledge of elements exposed in the later discussion about the meaning of *logos* should serve as a test for the viability of the inter-relational version of UKM as a theory of what knowledge of elements amounts to. If Plato's point in refuting the dream theory's asymmetry claim is that we should replace its primitive version of UKM with the more sophisticated inter-relational version, it should follow that achieving a systematic classification of the phonetic properties of individual letters is both necessary and sufficient to liberate the novice speller from the condition discussed later in the text, that wherein she is able to properly recognize one and the same letter in some syllables but not in others, or applies one and the same letter properly in one syllable and erroneously in another.

But while the inter-relational model may provide a sufficient answer to the original "logical" puzzle which Socrates used to refute the dream theory's asymmetry claim (since it offers an account of how a letter, which is by stipulation simple, can nevertheless be known), it quite clearly does not provide the solution to the practical problem brought up in the examination of the second suggestion for the meaning of *logos*. The inadequacy of the inter-relational model in this context is brought out by the fact that it is very easy to imagine someone who has in fact achieved full mastery of spelling in some phonetic alphabet yet has done so without ever having been exposed to a systematic classification of its elements. And, conversely, it is just as easy to imagine someone with full command of the systematic classification of phonemes in a given alphabet who nevertheless has not fully mastered the art of spelling. The sort of account which Fine offers as the manifestation of knowledge of letters is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for attaining the reliable ability to spell each

and every syllable in one's language. While cases of people who possess this kind of theoretical systematic knowledge of phonemes yet who are nevertheless incompetent spellers may be rare, this is simply because we do not usually teach students the science of phonetics before they have fully mastered the art of spelling. But there is no principled reason to think this cannot be done.

3 An Alternative to UKM

If the identification and classification of the phonetic properties of letters is not the sort of knowledge that allows one to be a consistently successful speller, and yet knowledge of letters is, in fact, necessary for attaining this ability, in what does this knowledge consist? In what follows I shall offer an alternative account of what Plato's conception of knowledge of letters consists in, and proceed to suggest that it informs his notion of elements of reality and of how the grasp of such elements is conducive to knowledge.

The gist of this suggestion is as follows: knowledge of letters *just is* the ability to properly recognize each and every letter in the various combinations in which it appears. Unlike what is supposed by UKM, knowledge of the letter Theta is not manifested in the ability to provide an account of the unique phonetic characteristics which distinguish it from all other phonemes (regardless of whether this constitutes an analysis or merely a classification), independently of its various actual manifestations. Rather, this knowledge consists in the ability to recognize that Theta is what the syllable "THE" and the Syllable "THŌ" have in common, and that it accounts for the unique manner in which the syllable "THE" differs from the syllable "TE", and so on for all other syllables in one's spoken language. The main point here is that the sort of information which is constitutive of knowledge of Theta cannot be acquired or specified independently of the ability to specify it as responsible for the relevant similarities and differences between various audible syllables. One gains more and more "information" about Theta in the process of learning to recognize it in its combination with other consonants and with each of the vowels. Once this ability has been perfected, one need not learn anything in addition in order to count as a "knower" of the phonetic element signified by the letter-name "Theta". The kind of information about each phoneme exhibited in this perfected capacity simply cannot be reduced to or captured by a limited set of descriptive propositions about their audible properties.[11] This means that,

11 Note that this is not tantamount to accepting the dream theory's claim that nothing at all can be said of elements by themselves (201e4–202a4). It is merely a commitment to the

unlike the basic assumption of either version of UKM, knowledge of elements necessarily appeals to and inseparable from the original phenomena in whose account they figure.

Since this conception of knowledge of letters may seem speculative in the context of the *Theaetetus*, I want to bolster it by appealing to evidence outside the dialogue before proceeding to discuss its philosophical implications. The first passage that supports this reading is the *Statesman*'s discussion of the use of paradigms which I previously referred to. As we have seen, the passage describes the situation of the novice speller who properly recognizes certain letters of the alphabet in short or simple combinations but fails to do so in other more difficult cases. Now, we are told that the familiar remedy for this problem (278a–c) is to use the short syllable as a "paradigm" by juxtaposing it with the longer or difficult one and allowing the student to recognize the similarity between them for which the common letter is responsible. The Visitor claims that this method is to be used until the student is able to recognize each and every letter as the same as itself and different from all the others when it appears in all the syllables. What is important for our purposes in this passage is that the visitor's description of the attainment of perfected grammatical competence mentions no supporting role for an underlying theoretical grasp of facts about "letters themselves". Rather, the emphasis is on the idea that the knowledge of letters which the novice speller must strive to achieve consists in the consistent ability to recognize them in their actual combinations.

The second passage which lends support to my reading appears in the *Republic*. The context is Socrates' discussion of the criteria for having attained a fully educated state. He claims that this state is achieved when one is able to recognize the forms of temperance, courage, liberality, great-mindedness and their kin (τὰ τῆς σωφροσύνης εἴδη καὶ ἀνδρείας καὶ ἐλευθεριότητος καὶ μεγαλοπρεπείας καὶ ὅσα τούτων ἀδελφὰ) as they inhere in their various manifestations (402b9–c8). In order to elucidate the nature of this task, Socrates uses the spelling paradigm and appeals to the familiar process of students attaining grammatical competence. In 402a–b he makes the following claim:

> It is like learning to read, then. We became adequately proficient (γραμμάτων πέρι τότε ἱκανῶς εἴχομεν; 402a7–8) when the few letters that there are did not escape us in any of the different words in which they are scattered about; and when we did not disregard them, either in a small word or a big one, as if they were not worth noticing; but tried hard to distinguish

idea that whatever can be said of elements "in themselves" (such as their place in a classification of phonetic properties) does not constitute knowledge of them.

> them wherever they occur, knowing that we would not be competent in spelling until we achieved this state.
>
> *Resp.* 402a7–b3 (REEVE's translation slightly modified)

What is important for our purposes here is that Socrates presents the ability to consistently recognize which letter accounts for the relevant audible aspect of syllables as both a sufficient and necessary condition for attaining full knowledge in the field: we become fully proficient once we have achieved this ability (τότε ἱκανῶς εἴχομεν), and we are not proficient until we do so (οὐ πρότερον ἐσόμενοι γραμματικοὶ πρὶν οὕτως ἔχοιμεν). Just as in the *Statesman* passage, there is no mention of any process wherein the student learns about the phonetic properties of each phoneme, a process which might be taken to be conducive to or coextensive with the state of perfected grammatical competence. There are no additional "facts" that must be learnt about the relations of distinct phonemes, i.e. how they themselves differ from and are similar to each other. The letters are simply means for grasping such similarities and differences between audible syllables.

4 Implications of the Alternative Model

I would like to highlight two corollaries of this view of what knowledge of letters consists in, since they will help inform us about, or at least be suggestive of, Plato's conception of what elements of reality are and how they facilitate knowledge. First, note that according to this view, each phoneme's distinct characteristics are dependent on and derived from the *actual* combinations in which it is found. Any fact about a phoneme is directly bound with some aspect of the phenomena which it explains, i.e. with the audible syllables that exist in the relevant language. To illustrate: if, contrary to fact, the Greek language did not contain any instances where the phoneme Theta was followed by the phoneme Omega, certain facts about the nature of the phoneme Theta itself would have been different than they in fact are. This is because the phoneme in question would then not have accounted for the audible difference which (as things stand) exists between e.g., the sounds THŌ and TŌ, nor would it account for the similarity between, e.g., the sounds THŌ and THOU. These "aspects" of Theta, which ancient Greek spellers had to learn to recognize, would simply have been non-existent.[12] All this is a direct result of the fact

12 Notice, as further proof against the interrelation model, that this hypothesized change in the "facts" about Theta would not affect its phonetic classification. Spellers in both

that phonetic elements are inseparable from the specific language to whose alphabet they belong.[13]

And now, consider the target of the analogy. If the nature of each element of reality, like that of phonemes, is inseparable from the phenomena for which it accounts, it turns out that a grasp of elements enables one not merely to offer a causal account of certain facts that hold in our world, but to provide an explanation of why they hold *of necessity*.[14] As long as one is committed to the idea that elements are explanatorily or even causally prior to the phenomena (an idea which, as I have said, is in Plato's eyes fully consistent with this model of knowledge of elements) the picture that emerges is that, given the nature of the elements, the explananda could not have been other than they are. The spelling model brings with it a unique relation between explanantia and explananda which is markedly different from the one that follows when elements are construed according to UKM: since the nature of the elements is inseparable from the various facets of the facts for which they account, these facts do not constitute one possible state of affairs among many which is compatible with these natures. Rather, the facts as they stand are the unique and necessary manifestation of them.[15] This is in stark contrast to the rela-

---

linguistic worlds would be taught one and the same phonetic classification as an account of Theta.

13 Importantly, this fact makes it redundant to speak, as proponents of UKM tend to do (see e.g. BURNYEAT 1990, pp. 210–211), of the need to supplement the student's acquaintance with the elements with a grasp of the rules governing their combination. This is because according to my suggested model, the facts which define knowledge of each phoneme are inseparable from the facts regarding which other phonemes it does and does not combine with in practice. Note also that similarly to the case of grasping the phonetic classification of elements, the grasp of such rules of combination will not be sufficient to ensure correct spelling. After all, there is nothing in the rules of phonotactics to explain why "Theodorus" is spelt with a Theta rather than a Tau. Finally, note that Socrates' empirical account of Theaetetus' education in letters (206a5–8) makes absolutely no mention of the grasp of such rules as part of the learning process.

14 In this regard, it is important to note that the elements are first and foremost responsible for similarities and differences between types, not tokens. Whatever explanatory power they have in regard to tokens is strictly derivative on their explanatory power in relation to types.

15 A point of clarification: the necessity of the explananda to which I am referring pertains to whatever aspect of reality is analogous to basic syllables, not to whole words. That is, given the nature of the phonemes in a given language, that language must necessarily consist of the basic syllables which it in fact contains (by saying "basic" I am attempting to countenance the possibility that Plato realized that a number of "permissible" complex syllabic combinations are not, in fact, instantiated in any Greek word). The specific "nature" of the phonemes places no *quantitative* limit on the combination of syllables with each other.

tion between the phenomena and their explanantia under UKM: since UKM assumes that elements have a nature that is specifiable independently of their place in accounts of the relevant explananda, the latter are related to them only contingently: the facts about the elements would remain exactly as they are even if it happened that reality, i.e. the sphere of phenomena or explananda, were different than it in fact is.

This, I think, suggests an important fact about the standard Plato sets for the possession of *epistēmē* in the *Theaetetus*: knowledge of a given sphere is manifested in an account that explains why the relevant facts in it hold *of necessity*. The way to achieve this is to discover a set of concepts, i.e. the so-called *stoicheia*, which are tailor-made for expounding the differences and similarities between the phenomena in the field. The successful discovery of these explanatory notions, i.e. (minimally) the ability to expound in the most economical and coherent way all the relevant similarities and differences between the totality of relevant phenomena and to show why, in light of these elements, the phenomena cannot but exist in the way they do, constitutes the attainment of knowledge of the field. And, correspondingly, this helps define the limits of which parts or aspects of reality are in principle knowable: what is "knowable" about reality just are those aspects of it about which it will make sense to say that they exist of necessity, i.e. those which can be linked systematically to other aspects using the same set of explanatory elements.

This emphasis on the necessary relation between phonemes and the actual syllables in which they are found allows us to recognize an additional feature of this model, having to do with the ontological status of elements: consider Theaetetus' reply to Socrates' request for a *logos* of Sigma in 203b2–8: Theaetetus claimed that it is impossible to provide an account of linguistic stoicheia since, unlike syllables, these stoicheia are not even independently pronounceable linguistic phenomena. Thus, he claims, while Sigma has merely a sound (ψόφος) of sorts (a kind of hissing of the tongue) but no voice (τῶν ἀφώνων ἐστί), Beta has neither sound nor voice (οὔτε φωνὴ οὔτε ψόφος), as is the case with most phonemes. The point I take Plato to be bringing to the fore here is that unlike syllables which are fully pronounceable articulate sounds, phonemes are mere quasi-sounds, in the sense that they do not enjoy an independent existence as vocal phenomena apart from their place in syllables.[16] Rather than being independently existing linguistic phenomena which speakers can voice and then combine to form syllables (the way they combine syllables

16 This point about the letters and syllables model was originally made by RYLE (1960) who, however, used it to argue that the object of Plato's interest in these passages is the structure of sentences, rather than the nature of scientific accounts.

to form words), Plato draws our attention to the fact that our recognition of the existence of individual phonemes is, essentially, an intellectual, scientific practice, where by 'essentially' I mean that there is no purely perceptual way to grasp them on their own. In this sense, phonemes are by nature scientific objects, rather than further phenomena.

What Plato does here is draw the reader's attention to an ontological asymmetry between linguistic phenomena and their elements, corresponding to their distinct epistemic status: words and syllables, which are the explananda of the science of spelling, belong to the phenomenal world, as they are objects of perception. Phonemes – the elements and unique explanantia of the science of spelling – are, on the other hand, non-perceptual. Rather, they are scientifically recognized aspects of audible syllables and, as such, are in some sense intelligible objects or well-founded scientific hypotheses. Yet, despite this status, Plato in no way treats phonemes as mere mind-dependent abstractions, ontologically inferior to the phenomena they explain.[17] Their explanatory and stipulated causal status in relation to the phenomena endows them with an ontological status which he considers to be primary and superior.

This ontological aspect of Plato's conception of phonemes allows us to recognize a parallel ontological aspect of what he takes to be 'the elements of reality': we saw that phonemes are not linguistic phenomena on par with the audible syllables which constitute the explananda of the field, but are rather expertly delineated aspects of audible phenomena whose existence is postulated due to their explanatory priority. We can now surmise that whatever the elements of reality are in Plato's view, they must be radically different from the phenomena they explain. This means, minimally, that since the phenomena in question are physical or perceptual in nature, their *stoicheia* cannot be further physical and perceptual objects. What the spelling model is meant to help us see is that it is essential to the notion of 'knowledge-conveying elements' that they are ontologically distinct from the phenomena whose explanations or causes they are.

17 This might have been the case if Plato did not think that there was a correct and an incorrect way of identifying phonemes. Yet the fact that there is only one proper set of phonemes (Plato does not express any awareness of the fact that there are different phonemes for different languages), one which was, as it were, waiting all along to be discovered, allows him to view phonemes as genuine causes of linguistic phenomena. This notion of factual discovery is evident in the *Philebus*' tale of Theuth's bequeathing of the science of letters to mankind in 18b6–d2. Not only is Theuth a god (whose thoughts, apparently, correspond to fact), but when describing Theuth's discoveries, Socrates makes sure to use the verb κατενόησεν (18b6, b9) which strongly implies the recognition of objective fact.

If the suggestions above reflect Plato's conception of philosophical elements, we can now see the way in which the dream theory is a device both for indicating the basic framework which an explanatory science of nature should take and, at the same time, for exposing a basic inadequacy that is common to contemporary philosophical systems which attempted to follow this basic framework. According to Plato, the dream theory is on the right track in holding that a general science of reality, like that of any particular delineated field, requires the discovery of elements. Yet Socrates' description of the dream theory's peculiar commitments about the nature of elements allows us to see the way in which its conception of what they are and how they facilitate knowledge is mistaken. The theory's commitment to an epistemological asymmetry between elements and complexes implies that it does not take the consistent ability to relate the proper elements to the relevant complexes as constituting knowledge of elements. In holding that knowledge of elements (if it were possible) would require an analysis of them, the theory commits itself to UKM. Rather than taking knowledge of elements to consist in the proper identification of them in the complexes in which they appear, the asymmetry claim implies that there must be further facts, unique to elements and distinct from their actual combinations, which reveal their nature thus allowing them to be known.

We have also seen that for Plato, the rejection of UKM regarding elements goes hand in hand with an ontological commitment about their unique nature: since the elements' nature is essentially bound up with their explanatory status, elements are not further physical or perceptual objects, but possess the kind of being which can only be grasped and recognized by reason. Since the dream theory wrongly espouses UKM we can expect that it will also subscribe to a mistaken view about the ontological status of elements, and that it will fail to properly distinguish their nature from that of the phenomena they are meant to explain. And, in fact, this expectation is fulfilled when we read that, according to the theory, elements are perceptible in nature (202b6–7).[18] And if elements are perceptible, they are also bodily in nature. Clearly, elements of this kind are not essentially scientific objects which are exclusively grasped by reason, as Plato thinks elements must be.

These observations about the commitments of the dream theory vis-à-vis Plato's own view of elements now puts us in a position to recognize how the dream theory's flaws are representative of contemporary cosmologies which

18 The dream theory's mistaken conception of elements as constituent parts of the phenomena they are meant to explain is discussed in THALER (2012).

utilize elements as explanatory factors.[19] Take Empedocles' roots, Democritus' atoms, and Anaxagoras' ingredients (whatever precisely their scope was meant to be): All these elements are akin to the phenomena they are meant to explain in being bodily in nature. As such, they all possess properties that are specifiable independently of their phenomenal combinations (shape and size in the case of atoms, heat, cold, wetness and dryness in the case of the roots, and the various familiar perceptual properties of Anaxagoras' ingredients). We can summarize this flaw, from Plato's perspective, by saying that such elements are not explanatory 'by nature'. That is, their defining properties are independent of their explanatory status.[20]

And this flaw, as we should now be in a position to recognize, is intimately connected in Plato's mind with an additional failing of these philosophical systems. There is nothing in the nature of the elements espoused by these systems which explains why the physical, phenomenal world of which we are part necessarily exists as it does. This is explicit in Empedocles and Democritus. The former assumes that the basic types of phenomena (both cosmic and zoological) around us are different both from those that existed in previous stages of the cosmic cycle (B17, B61 DK) and from those that will exist in its future stages, and all this without any change in the nature of the elements. Democritus countenances both the notion of gradual evolution of life in our world and the possibility of other worlds consisting of the same atoms yet manifesting significantly different combinations of them (A40 DK). Thus, not only is the nature of the elements compatible with different phenomenal combinations of them, the existence of such phenomena is an hypothesis which is integral to the explanatory mechanism of the cosmologies in question.[21] And while it

19 This touches the vexed question regarding the historical origins of the use of the term *stoicheion* to denote an element of reality. Aristotle (*Met.* I 4, 985a32) claims that Empedocles was the first to do so, while Eudemus (Simplicius *In Phys.*, proem. 7. 10–17) claims that it was in fact Plato who inaugurated this use. Modern scholarship is divided on the issue. BURNET (1930) p. 336 n. 4; KAHN (1960), p. 120, take the philosophical sense to have originated with the atomists; According to RYLE (1960), pp. 431–51, relying on the evidence of Sextus (M. 10, 249–250), Plato took over this use of the term from the Pythagoreans. For a useful discussion of the question whether the original philosophical use of the term is self-consciously parasitic on its alphabetical sense, see CRAWLY (2005).

20 For the idea that Plato uses the dream theory to criticize the materialistic nature of pre-Socratic theories see already SEDLEY (2004), pp. 157–163.

21 To clarify: the point is not that the phenomena which constitute the explananda of the science could have been constituted by different elements from the ones of which they, in fact, are. It is rather that according to these systems, there is nothing in the nature of such elements which necessitates the existence of these particular phenomena. Thus, while the existence of souls may necessitate round atoms (A28 DK) the existence of round atoms in itself does not necessitate the existence of souls.

is less clear whether or not Anaxagoras took the state of the world to be necessary in light of his elements,[22] it is nonetheless revealing of Plato's understanding of his system that in the *Phaedo* he takes him to task precisely for failing to explain why some aspects of nature necessarily exists as they do (ἐπεκδιηγήσεσθαι τὴν αἰτίαν καὶ τὴν ἀνάγκην, 97e1–2).

5 The Unique Appeal of the Spelling Paradigm

I would like to conclude with a somewhat speculative suggestion for why Plato took the spelling paradigm to be particularly appealing as a model for 'elements of reality'. After all, in Plato's day the idea that scientific understanding in particular spheres requires the discovery of proprietary elements seems to have been sufficiently established for him to have chosen a science other than spelling to serve as his paradigm.[23] Thus, there has to be something in the nature of grammatical elements which seemed to Plato to capture a necessary feature of 'real elements' better than the unique elements of other fields.

I want to begin my suggested answer to this question by noting that Socrates' description of the dream theory seems intended to motivate the reader to ask what the range of such a science of reality would be. The dream theorist is notably vague about this, claiming only that elements are relevant for providing an account of «us and the other things» (201e2). Assuming that Plato's projected science is in fact meant to deal with the nature of man, what precisely does the highly tantalizing notion of "other things" refer to? It is in this regard that the spelling model becomes suggestive. Plato's invocation of the spelling model in the *Statesman* passage mentioned earlier (278a–c) discusses the case of a student who is able to recognize the appearance of a certain letter in one syllabic combination, yet fails to do so in a different audible syllable. This scenario then leads the visitor to discuss the method of using paradigms to teach novice spellers, a method which consists in the introduction of a different, more accessible syllable which contains the letter the novice is unable to recognize in the original one. This method then finds its parallel in the search for the definition of the statesman in the introduction of the art of weaving

22 B4a DK which mentions other worlds having the same properties as ours is liable to be read as implying necessity, though perhaps this is due to the intervention of Mind and not because of the nature of the elements themselves.

23 It is uncertain precisely which systematic disciplines (other than letters) were already in Plato's day explicitly thought of in terms of the notion of *stoicheia*. Aristotle mentions elements of geometry and demonstration (*Met.* V 3, 1014a35–1014b3) and of rhetoric (*Rhet.* 1. 2, 1358A35); Socrates in the *Theaetetus* takes Theaetetus to be familiar with the notion of musical elements (206a10–b3); Isocrates mentions elements of Government (*Ad Nicoclem* 16. 7) and of rhetoric and general prudence (*Ad filium Jasonis* 8. 8).

as a model for statesmanship, under the assumption that the two expertise contain a shared element (279a, ff). This suggests that the spelling model is particularly useful for exhibiting the idea that certain spheres which are liable to appear unrelated to each other are in fact unified by common explanatory principles.[24] And if this is so, it invites the question which apparently distinct spheres are, in Plato's mind, particularly worthy of being reduced to common explanatory principles and of being taken as the province of a single science.

As a clue to answering this question, I want to look back at the *Theaetetus*' famous digression which compares the ethical and intellectual mores and capacities of the philosopher to those of the ethically cynical litigious man (172c–177c). While the philosopher in the digression is usually described as "other-worldly" in orientation and so as thoroughly uninvolved in the petty viciousness of civil life, it has not often been remarked that he is also presented as a man of science. Thus, the philosopher who comes as close as humanly possible to the paradigm of virtue is also described as «geometrizing upon earth, measuring its surfaces, astronomising in the heavens; tracking down by every path the entire nature of each whole among the things that are, and never condescending to what lies near at hand» (173e3–174a2, translation Levett). So, the philosopher whose overtly ethical interests are manifested in the pursuit of questions such as «what is man, and what is appropriate for such a nature to do or suffer in contrast to other natures» (174b4–5), is, at the same time, a practitioner of geometry and astronomy, i.e. a student of physical nature. And this surprising piece of information about his seemingly extra-ethical interests is immediately followed by the claim that he is interested in investigating the nature of «wholes» (πᾶσαν πάντῃ φύσιν ἐρευνωμένη τῶν ὄντων ἑκάστου ὅλου; 173e6–174a1), a claim which, if read in light of the later discussion of the dream theory and its interest in wholes and their elements, seems to allude to the idea of searching for common explanatory principles in seemingly disparate spheres of nature.

In light of this, what I wish to suggest is that the two primary spheres which Plato thinks should be unified by discovering their common elements are those of nature and human values. This immediately sheds new light on Plato's dissatisfaction with physical theories which incorporate the notion of elements, yet view the present state of nature as a contingent fact. If Plato

24 In the *Statesman* this basic idea is brought out using the method of collection and division, and the spelling model is introduced in order to help clarify one of the aspects of this method (the use of a simple paradigm in order to facilitate the analysis of a difficult notion). Yet since the spelling model is used in the *Republic* and *Theaetetus* without any mention of the method of division, I take it to be conceptually broader and in principle independent of the specific tenets of the method.

takes the epistemic status of ethical truths to be reflective of that of physical (or specifically cosmic) truths, it stands to reason that he is eager to show that a proper science of nature is based on principles which reveal the necessity of natural phenomena. Recall that for Plato moral relativism is a living threat. Specifically, in the *Theaetetus*, this threat takes the form of the claim that while nature is a realm of objective fact, the political and ethical spheres are governed and fully determined by the judgments of each city, and are such as to have in them nothing which is true 'by nature' (172a1–b7).[25] For this threat to be neutralized, Plato must show that the sphere of ethics and that of nature are ultimately explained by the very same principles.

But then, if the discovery of the elements of physical reality revealed that the realm of nature is one of contingent truths, this unifying project will not achieve its intended aim of saving the objectivity of the ethical sphere. If the state of nature could just as well have been other than it is, it follows that even under the assumption that the realm of ethics is somehow subordinate to nature or has a being which is parallel to it, this will not yield the kind of objectivity which Plato is after. In order for the idea that ethics is a sphere which exists 'by nature' to have compelling normative force, the notion of nature must include that of necessity.[26] After all, the idea of appealing to nature as a grounding for ethical norms will be useless if it is open to the objection that while such norms are in fact 'naturally just' for all earth-dwellers, they are naturally unjust for the Venusians. If these suggestions are along the right lines, Plato's tying of the notion of philosophical *epistēmē* to the idea of elements

25 «And regarding political matters, about what is fine and base, just and unjust, pious and impious, whatever each city thinks and lays down as lawful (*nomima*) for itself, these things really are for it. And in such matters no individual is wiser than another individual, nor any city wiser than another.... It is in these fields of which I am speaking, in matters of the just and the unjust, and the pious and impious that they would contend that none of them has by nature any being particular to itself (οὐκ ἔστι φύσει αὐτῶν οὐδὲν οὐσίαν ἑαυτοῦ ἔχον), but that this becomes true by common conception when it is conceived and as long as it is conceived. And all those who do not subscribe in any way to Protagoras' theory put forward this wisdom.».

26 I do not wish to commit myself to the claim that Presocratic thinkers who incorporated notions of contingency into their cosmogonies would themselves necessarily take this as having clear implication for the status of morality. For the claim that Empedocles, Democritus and Anaxagoras make no explicit connection between their physics and any ethical notions (which were explicit in the case of the first two) see LAKS (2017). Yet note that at least in the case of Archelaus the connection does seem self-conscious: nature as we know it is the product of evolution due to the operation of physical forces (A4 DK); the just and the base are merely conventional (A1 DK). For an account of the connection between Archelaus' cosmogony and his (not so much ethics but) account of the development of society, see BETEGH (2016).

is not motivated merely by epistemological considerations regarding what knowledge of reality must be like. Rather, it is first and foremost an attempt to lay down the conceptual framework for a naturalistic theory of moral realism.

References

BETEGH, G. (2016). Archelaus on Cosmogony and the Origins of Social Institutions. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 51, pp. 1–40.

BOSTOCK, D. (1988). *Plato's Theaetetus*. OUP. Oxford.

BURNET, J. (1930[4]). *Early Greek Philosophy*. A & C Black. London.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The Theaetetus of Plato*, with a revised translation by M.J. Levett. Hackett. Indianapolis.

CHAPPELL, T. (2005). *Reading Plato's Theaetetus*. Hackett. Indianapolis.

CRAWLY, T.J. (2005). On the Use of *Stoicheion* in the Sense of Element. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 29, pp. 367–394.

CROMBIE, I.M. (1963). *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, vol. II. Routledge. London.

FINE, G.J. (1979). Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*. *Philosophical Review*, 88, pp. 366–97.

KAHN, C.H. (1960). *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology*. Columbia University Press. New York.

LAKS, A. (2017). What is Presocratic Ethics?. In: BOBONICH, C. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Ethics*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, pp. 11–29.

MCDOWELL, J. (1973). *Plato: Theaetetus*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

NEHAMAS, A. (1984). *Episteme* and *Logos* in Plato's Later Thought. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 66.1, pp. 11–36.

RUNCINMAN, W.G. (1962). *Plato's Later Epistemology*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

RYLE, G. (1960). Letters and Syllables in Plato. *Philosophical Review*, 69 (1960), pp. 431–451.

SEDLEY, D. (2004). *The Midwife of Platonism*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

THALER, N. (2012). Taking the Syllable Apart: The Theaetetus on Elements and Knowledge. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 41, pp. 201–228.

WHITE, N.P. (1976). *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*. Hackett. Indianapolis.

SECTION 6

The Theaetetus *beyond Plato*

CHAPTER 14

Doxa and *Epistēmē* in Plato's *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*

Walter Cavini

• • •

For indeed a man who holds an opinion (ὁ δοξάζων) is in an unhealthy condition with regard to the truth, compared with one who has knowledge (πρὸς τὸν ἐπιστάμενον).

ARISTOTLE, *Met.*, Γ 4, 1008^{b}30–31 (transl. KIRWAN [1993^{2}])

• • •

"I know" is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like "I believe") but between me and a fact.

WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, § 90

• • •

What I believe or what I say may fit the facts, in which case it is true; or it may fail to fit the facts, in which case it is false. What I know, however, is the fact itself, not something that merely corresponds, or fails to correspond, to the facts.

VENDLER (1972), p. 114

• • •

[K]nowing is the ideal, and believing is
some kind of approximation to that ideal.

NAGEL (2014), p. 59

∵

In his commentary on Plato's *Theaetetus*, Myles Burnyeat says several times that Aristotle was an «ancient reader of the dialogue».[1] Indeed, if as scholarly consensus would have it, the *Theaetetus* was composed in the 360s BCE, when Aristotle joined the Academy, he was a «contemporary reader of the dialogue».[2] The *Theaetetus* appears more than once in the *corpus aristotelicum*. At *Met*. Γ 5, 1010b12, Plato is mentioned by name: «ὥσπερ καὶ Πλάτων λέγει», in connection with the passage in the *Theaetetus* in which it is said that the opinion of a doctor is worth more than that of a lay person in predicting someone's health or disease.[3] Other noteworthy echoes: the passage of the *Theaetetus* on wonder as the *pathos* of the philosopher, which is taken up and elaborated in *Met*. A 2; the image of the block of wax, reproposed in the *De Anima*; and above all, though it is not always noted, Aristotle's solution to the paradox of change without becoming in terms of the distinction between extrinsic changes – dubbed by Peter Geach «mere Cambridge changes» – and intrinsic changes. It is not always recognised that Aristotle offers a solution to this paradox, which the *Theaetetus* had left unsolved, in *Met*. N 1 and in *Physics* V 2.[4] In short, Aristotle certainly was an «ancient reader of the dialogue».

Yet I must confess that, reading the *Posterior Analytics*, I have often asked myself how Aristotle reacted to his reading of the *Theaetetus* on the problem of knowledge, of *epistēmē*. After all, the *Theaetetus* and the *Posterior Analytics* are the two greatest works handed down by antiquity on the problem of knowledge and, specifically, on the problem of scientific knowledge. If we follow the chronology proposed by Ingemar Düring for the *Analytics*, namely that they date to the middle of the 350s BCE, then there is an extreme proximity in time between the *Theaetetus* and the *Posterior Analytics*. But even without trespassing in the known minefield of Aristotelian chronology, there is no doubt that there is a clear reflection of Platonic doctrine in the *Posterior Analytics*, both negative and, as we shall see, positive, in an innovation that Aristotle introduces.

As is well known, the most negative reaction, set out in chapter twenty-two of the first book of the *Posterior Analytics*, is Aristotle's scornful rejection of the Platonic ontology of Ideas. We must say farewell to the Ideas: they are τερετίσματα, which is to say mere sounds, from the verb τερετίζειν, «to warble», i.e.

1 BURNYEAT (1990), p. 217.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 169: «Now Aristotle was a contemporary reader of the *Theaetetus* – the only one about whom we in the twentieth century have enough information to say […] that he studied Part III of the *Theaetetus* carefully»; see also p. 204.

3 Cf. Plat., *Theaet*. 178c–179a.

4 Arist., *Met*. N 1, 1088^a29–35; *Phys*. V 2, 225^a11–13 (= *Met*. K 12, 1068^a11–13); cf. SEDLEY (1998), p. 17.

vocalisations ἄνευ λόγου, without words and without meaning. Likewise, at the beginning of the final chapter of the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle describes as ἄτοπος, absurd, the doctrine that we possess latent knowledge, an innate knowledge of the principles, in clear reference to the Platonic doctrine of ἀνάμνησις, recollection.

But how did Aristotle react, if he did indeed react, in the face of the failure of the definitions of knowledge in the *Theaetetus*, and in particular the failure of the third definition? I hazard that there are two passages in the *Posterior Analytics* that bring to light Aristotle's reaction. The first is *APo.* I 33 which, as we shall see, marks a clear distinction between *epistēmē* and *doxa* as well as between the objects of *epistēmē*, the ἐπιστητά, and the objects of *doxa*, the δοξαστά. Whatever it is, *epistēmē* is not a *doxa*, and the objects of *epistēmē* are not objects of *doxa*. This is the first Aristotelian passage. In the second, again in *APo.* II 19, we read that «ἐπιστήμη δ' ἅπασα μετὰ λόγου ἐστί». It is not the δόξα ἀληθής that is μετὰ λόγου, as in Plato's *Theaetetus*, but rather *epistēmē*. We shall return to what this μετὰ λόγου means.

Let us begin with the first passage:

T1 Arist., *APo.* I 33, 88ᵇ30–35

> Τὸ δ' ἐπιστητὸν καὶ ἐπιστήμη διαφέρει τοῦ δοξαστοῦ καὶ δόξης, ὅτι ἡ μὲν ἐπιστήμη καθόλου καὶ δι' ἀναγκαίων, τὸ δ' ἀναγκαῖον οὐκ ἐνδέχεται ἄλλως ἔχειν. ἔστι δέ τινα ἀληθῆ μὲν καὶ ὄντα, ἐνδεχόμενα δὲ καὶ ἄλλως ἔχειν. δῆλον οὖν ὅτι περὶ μὲν ταῦτα ἐπιστήμη οὐκ ἔστιν· εἴη γὰρ ἂν ἀδύνατα ἄλλως ἔχειν τὰ δυνατὰ ἄλλως ἔχειν.
>
> What is scientifically knowable and scientific knowledge differ from what is opinable and opinion because scientific knowledge is universal and comes through necessities. What is necessary cannot be otherwise, while there are some items which are real and are the case but which can also be otherwise. It is plain that scientific knowledge cannot be concerned with these items; for then what can be otherwise could not be otherwise.
>
> transl. BARNES [1993], modified

There is an absolute distinction or difference (*diapherei*) between, on the one hand, *epistēton* and *epistēmē* and, on the other, *doxaston* and *doxa*. We should note that Aristotle here uses the term *epistēta*, which appears in Plato's *Theaetetus* only when the third definition of knowledge is being formulated from hearsay, and nowhere else in the *corpus platonicum*. This seems to me a clear indicator that Aristotle is referring to something to do with the

third definition of the *Theaetetus*. The ancient commentators, in particular Themistius and Philoponous, and, among the moderns, Zabarella[5] held that the distinction was not so much between *epistēmē* and *doxa* in general, as between *epistēmē* and *doxa alethēs*, for they pointed out that it is obvious that there is a distinction between *epistēmē* and *doxa*, while it is problematic whether there is one between *epistēmē* and *doxa alethēs*: once again, the *Theaetetus*.

I suggest that the ancient commentators and the great Zabarella have missed a trick here. Why? Here the Aristotelian move comes into play. Before bringing forward the key term of my account, I would like to clarify one point about the objects of *epistēmē* and of *doxa*. In the *Theaetetus*, *doxa* cannot be regarded as the cognitive state regarding sensibles, as that which both is and is not, in the way that we find in the book five of the *Republic*. Now, as regards the objects of *doxa*, Aristotle adopts neither the Platonic distinction between sensibles and intelligibles nor the Parmenidean distinction between non-being and being, which we do find in the *Republic* but not in the *Theaetetus*. What he does adopt is what amounts to his great theoretical innovation, which we may call the "modal turn" in Greek ontology. That is to say, the contingent takes the place of the sensible and the necessary that of the intelligible. The particular takes the place of the sensible and the universal that of the intelligible. This is the true bidding farewell to the Ideas. Whether or not they are mere warblings, science is concerned with what is universal and not particular, with what is necessary and not contingent, with what cannot be otherwise: necessarily *p* if and only if it is not possible that not-*p*.[6]

This is the background to the chapter. The problem that *APo*. I 33 faces is whether or not, in light of this distinction, it is possible to have *epistēmē* and *doxa* of the same thing, which would apparently seem impossible. I cannot enter here into the details of Aristotle's proof,[7] but what interests me is to clarify why Themistius, Philoponous and Zabarella nod in thinking that the difference is that between *epistēmē* and *alethēs doxa*. Why, for Aristotle – and it is one of the upshots of my reading of this chapter and other Aristotelian passages –, unlike Plato, *epistēmē* and *doxa* are two species of the same genus. As we shall see, this is an absolute novelty, even from the lexical point of view:

5 Cf. Them., *in APo*. 39.25–26 Wallies; Phlp., *in APo*. 321.30–31 Wallies; ZABARELLA (1597/1966), p. 1016F.

6 Actually, as Aristotle knew, even scientific knowledge deals in the contingent, the ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολύ, as Jonathan Barnes rightly pointed out to me, but this "modality" is not taken into account in *APo*. I 33.

7 On which, cf. FINE (2010) and ANGIONI (2019), but without any reference to Plato's *Theaetetus*.

it involves the introduction of a new term of art into the vocabulary of Greek philosophy.[8]

What, then, is the common genus? What is shared in the distinction between *epistēmē* and *doxa*? A passage from the *De Anima* provides the answer:

T2 Arist., *de An.* III 3, 427^{b}24–26[9]

> εἰσὶ δὲ καὶ αὐτῆς τῆς ὑπολήψεως διαφοραί, ἐπιστήμη καὶ δόξα καὶ φρόνησις καὶ τἀναντία τούτων [...].
>
> But of the *belief*[10] itself there are also differences – knowledge, opinion, practical wisdom, and their contraries [...].

Or, to put it formally, ((x knows that p) or (x opines that p)) → x holds true (*hypolambanei*) that p.[11]

The genus of which *epistēmē* and *doxa* are species is *hypolēpsis*. What does this term mean? It is not attested before Aristotle in the systematic form it takes in his lexicon. I have been able to locate only two non-Aristotelian text of the fourth century BCE – a passage in Demosthenes' *On the Crown*[12] and a passage

8 Cf. MOSS/SCHWAB (2019), p. 11: «By introducing *hupolêpsis* as the generic attitude of taking-to-be-true that includes *doxa* as one variant and knowledge as another, Aristotle clears up conceptual confusions and enables a systematic theory of a notion that is crucial to modern philosophy but present in Plato only in nascent form».

9 Cf. also Arist., *Phys.* V 4, 227^{b}13–14 (ἡ ἐπιστήμη εἶδος μὲν ὑπολήψεως). Where not otherwise noted, translations are mine.

10 "Belief " (HICKS [1907]), "supposal" (HAMLYN [1968/1993]), "croyance" (BODÉÜS [1993]), "apprensione intellettiva" (MOVIA [2001]), "supposition" (POLANSKY [2007]), "conceiving" (SHIELDS [2016]). Cf. BODÉÜS (1993), p. 215 n. 3: «Le terme "croyance" (*hupolèpsis*) embrasse génériquement toute espèce de pensée, vraie ou fausse, particulière ou générale, que l'on peut spécifier, au besoin, comme simple opinion ou comme science»; SHIELDS (2016), pp. 279–80 and 385–6: «A somewhat slippery term, in some cases it is neutral as regard conviction, so that it might be rendered as 'entertaining' or perhaps 'supposition' [...]. Elsewhere, it is a generic term comprising both **knowledge** (*epistêmê*) and **belief** (*doxa*), where it evidently involves some pro-attitude beyond bare entertainment; in this sense, at least, is restricted by Aristotle to humans among the animals (427b28; cf. *Met.* 1008^{b}26, *EN* 1147^{b}4)».

11 Cf. BARNES (1993), p. 201 (= BARNES [1975], p. 192): «((**a** understands that P) or (**a** opines that P) → **a** believes that P)».

12 Demosthenes, XVIII 228.4–29.1: «οὐ γὰρ ἂν μεταπείθειν ὑμᾶς ἐζήτει μὴ τοιαύτης οὔσης τῆς ὑπαρχούσης ὑπολήψεως περὶ ἑκατέρου» («For unless that were your present *conception* of each of us, he [sc. Aeschines] would not have sought to change your view» [transl. PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE (1912)]).

in Hyperides' *Pro Euxenippo*[13] – but otherwise "*hypolēpsis*" is an Aristotelian term, except, as we shall see, its appearance in the Pseudo-Platonic *Definitions*, which in all likelihood date to the fourth century BCE.[14]

So what does "*hypolēpsis*" mean in Aristotle? In point of fact, its meaning was well clarified already by Bonitz in his *Index Aristotelicus* at the lemma *hypolambanō*:

T3 Bonitz (1870), 799^{b}26–27

> ὑπολαμβάνειν [from which *hypolēpsis* derives] – sumere ac statuere aliquid pro vero.[15]

Thus, *hypolēpsis* is holding something to be true or holding something as true. This is what, despite the distinction between them, *epistēmē* and *doxa* have in common: if I know that *p*, then I hold *p* to be true, and if I opine that *p*, then I hold *p* to be true. This makes a difference to the geography of our problem and represents a radical overhaul of it. Why? Because in this way knowledge obviously cannot, as a point of logic, be a species of opinion, and not only because the objects of *epistēmē* are different from those of *doxa*. Knowing that *p* does not imply having the *doxa* that *p*, but simply holding *p* to be true. Full stop.

The next job is to find ways to translate the nominalisation "*hypolēpsis*" and the verb "*hypolambanein*" in their properly Aristotelian meaning and in line with Bonitz's shrewd note. Recent translators of Aristotle have found various ways of rendering "*hypolēpsis*" in the many places in the *corpus aristotelicum* in which it appears. In short, Aristotle employs it in three possible ways. In

13 Hyperides, *pro Euxenippo* 32: «ἃ εἰς μὲν τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦτον οὐδὲν δήπου ἐστίν, εἴτε πολλὰ οὗτος κέκτηται εἴτε ὀλίγα, τοῦ δὲ λέγοντος κακοηθία καὶ ὑπόληψις εἰς τοὺς δικαστὰς οὐ δικαία» («It has surely nothing to do with this case whether he is a man of large means or small, and to raise the matter is malicious and implies an unfair *assumption* regarding the jury» [transl. BURTT (1962)]).

14 Cf. INGENKAMP (1967); HUTCHINSON (1997), p. 1677: «*What we find in* Definitions *is probably a tiny selection of all the definitions formulated and discussed in Plato's Academy in the middle years of the fourth century*»; MOSS/SCHWAB (2019), pp. 11–12 and n. 36; *contra* SOUILHÉ (1930), p. 157: «Nous pensons plutôt que notre collection est d'époque assez tardive et n'est pas, en tout cas, antérieure au stoicisme».

15 Cf. BARNES (1993), pp. 201–2 (= BARNES [1975], p. 192): «The word for "believe" is *hupolambanein*: although Aristotle sometimes uses this as a synonym for "opine" (*doxazein*), its official use is to mark out the genus of cognitive attitudes of which understanding and opinion are two species (cf. *An.* Γ 3, 427^{b}25). Thus the concern of *A* 33 is not (as we might unwarily suppose) the distinction between knowledge and belief: that distinction it takes for granted, and investigates the distinction between two species of belief, knowledge and (let us say) mere opinion».

one, "*hypolēpsis*" is a synonym of "*doxa*" when "*doxa*" does not mean opinion but rather doctrine, as in «ἡ περὶ τὰς ἰδέας ὑπόληψις», «the doctrine of the Ideas».[16] In another, "*hypolēpsis*" is a synonym of "*doxa*" when "*doxa*" means simply opinion, whether true or false.[17] This latter sense is what we will find, for instance, in Epicurus, at the beginning of the *Letter to Menoeceus* (124.1), where what is at issue are the opinions of the many about the gods: these opinions are not *prolēpseis*, which are always true, but false *hypolēpseis*.[18] This is a scrap of the afterlife that the term had in the ancient tradition.[19]

Then there is the technical sense that Bonitz brings out, in which "*hypolēpsis*" means holding to be true. How are we to render this? As I have already said, it has been translated in various ways in the *de Anima* passage. As for its occurrences in the *Organon*, it has been translated for instance: into Italian as "convinzione" (COLLI [1955]), "supposizione" (ZADRO [1974], ZANATTA [1996]), "persuasione" (MIGNUCCI [2007]), "giudizio" (MEDDA [2016]), "opinione" (FERMANI [2016]); into German as "Annahme" (DETEL [1993], HORN/RAPP 2002); into English as "conception" (PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE [1928]), FORSTER [1960]); or in Jacques Brunschwig's French translation of the *Topics*, where the word recurs very frequently, as "répresentation",[20] and in Pierre Pellegrin's French translation of the *Posterior Analytics* as "saisi". But I think that the best version is the one that takes account of the difference, marked perhaps also in English, between belief and opinion.[21]

---

16 Arist., *Met*. Λ 8, 1073^{a}17–18; A 9, 990^{b}23; *Mete*. 4, 1079^{a}19; BONITZ (1870), 800^{b}5–7.

17 Cf. Arist., *EN* VI 3, 1139^{b}17.

18 Cf. D.L. X 34 (= Epicur. [1] 34 1 Arrighetti): «τὴν δὲ δόξαν καὶ ὑπόληψιν λέγουσιν, ἀληθῆ τέ φασι καὶ ψευδῆ». In a fragment of a letter by Epicurus ([**127**] Arrighetti) mention is also made of Aristotle's *Analytics*, which goes to show that Epicurus read and could read Aristotle because the great treatises were obviously available (ARRIGHETTI [1973^2]), p. 683).

19 A comprehensive review of the use of "*hypolēpsis*" in the *corpus aristotelicum* is now in MOSS/SCHWAB (2019), §4.2; see also the entry **hypolêpsis** in HORN/RAPP (2002), where the term is translated «Annahme; lat. acceptatio», for the Aristotelian and hellenistic uses of it.

20 But see BRUNSCHWIG (2007), p. 247: «Dans les *Topiques*, la ὑπόληψις est régulièrement présentée comme le genre de l'ἐπιστήμη». In favor of the translation of ὑπόληψις with «répresentation» he refers to *Top*. IV 5, 125^{b}34–36, where it is said that πίστις is not a species of ὑπόληψις, for «ἐνδέχεται […] τὴν αὐτὴν ὑπόληψιν καὶ μὴ πιστεύοντα ἔχειν».

21 See CRIVELLI (1998), p. 21: «As δόξαι are states or dispositions, "δόξα" should be rendered by "belief" or "opinion" (not by "judgement"). "Belief" seems to me more appropriate than "opinion": since beliefs are more stable and deeply rooted states than opinions (one speaks of "religious beliefs" rather than "religious opinions"), Theaetetus' third definition "Knowledge is true δόξα" has better chances if it means "Knowledge is true belief" than if it means "Knowledge is true opinion"»; MOSS/SCHWAB (2019), p. 10: «Arguably, 'belief' in English does double-duty for generic belief and an inferior species thereof, or means only the former but through scalar implicature picks out the latter».

I am led, then, to think that "*hypolēpsis*" should be rendered as "belief", as Jonathan Barnes did in his Englishing of the *Posterior Analytics*. On this view, "*hypolēpsis*" should be distinguished from "*doxa*" understood as (mere) opinion. Thus, if *x* knows that *p*, then *x* believes that *p*, just as, if *x* opines that *p*, then *x* believes that *p*. Knowledge is not a species of opinion but of belief.[22] After all, it sounds distinctly odd to say that if someone knows that *p*, then that *p* is his opinion. The ancient commentators observed that no-one would say: «It is my opinion that the sun will rise tomorrow». Thus, this is the novelty that Aristotle introduced, and this novelty obviously makes it impossible for Aristotle to accept anything like the third definition of knowledge, if "*doxa*" means opinion: knowledge is not opinion nor yet true opinion. In this way, one might expect that, in turn, Aristotle would propose a definition of *epistēmē* or of *epistasthai* in terms not of *doxa* – *doxa alēthēs* –, of (true) opinion, but rather in terms of belief. But this is not what we find, and here we come to the second crucial point of my proposal.

Do we really have *definitions* of knowledge in the two texts, the *Theaetetus* and the *Posterior Analytics*? Let us see what "definition" is given of knowing (*epistasthai*) in the very well-known passage of the second chapter of the first book of the *Posterior Analytics*:

T4 Arist., *APo.* I 2, 71^{b}9–16

Ἐπίστασθαι δὲ οἰόμεθ' ἕκαστον ἁπλῶς [...] ὅταν τήν τ' αἰτίαν οἰώμεθα **γινώσκειν** δι' ἣν τὸ πρᾶγμά ἐστιν, ὅτι ἐκείνου αἰτία ἐστί, καὶ μὴ ἐνδέχεσθαι τοῦτ' ἄλλως ἔχειν. δῆλον τοίνυν ὅτι τοιοῦτόν τι **τὸ ἐπίστασθαί** ἐστι [...].

We think *we know scientifically* something *simpliciter* [...] when we think *we know* the cause because of which the fact holds, that it is its cause, and also that it is not possible for it to be otherwise. It is plain, then, that *know scientifically* is something of this sort [...].

transl. BARNES [1993], modified

«Know scientifically» translates the Greek verb *epistasthai*: thus, Aristotle appears to be defining *epistasthai*. But, as Jonathan Barnes rightly comments:

22 Cf. MOSS/SCHWAB (2019), p. 15: «while mainstream contemporary epistemologists often treat belief as the genus of knowledge, or at least hold that knowledge entails belief, Aristotle never employs *doxa* in this role, and indeed explicitly says that *doxa* excludes knowledge (at *An. Post.* 89^{a}38–39). Now we have seen that he does employ something else in this generic role: *hupolêpsis*».

> Aristotle offers an explicit definition of *epístasthai* at A 2 which carries with it the implication that *gignōskein* has a different sense.[23]

Just so, because *epistasthai* is defined in this text by way of the verb *ginōskein*. Indeed, the Greek reads, «Ἐπίστασθαι δὲ οἰόμεθ' ἕκαστον ἁπλῶς [...] ὅταν τήν τ' αἰτίαν οἰώμεθα **γινώσκειν**»; and again, «**γινώσκειν** δι' ἣν τὸ πρᾶγμά ἐστιν, ὅτι ἐκείνου αἰτία ἐστί». But the verb *ginōskein* is not itself defined. Barnes rightly observes that this «explicit definition», as he calls it, «carries with it the implication that *gignōskein* has a different sense». But what sense would this be? There is never any attempt to define «*ginōskein*».

Someone might suggest that there is a difference between «*epistasthai*» and «*ginōskein*», where «*epistasthai*» means something closer to scientific knowledge or, as Jonathan Barnes translates, «understanding»,[24] and «*gignōskein*» carries the more generic meaning of knowledge. But this cannot be right, because in a parallel passage at the beginning of the *Physics*, bracketed by the editors, we read:

T5 Arist., *Phys.* I 1, 184ᵃ12–14

> [...] τότε γὰρ οἰόμεθα **γιγνώσκειν** ἕκαστον, ὅταν τὰ αἴτια **γνωρίσωμεν** τὰ πρῶτα καὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς τὰς πρώτας καὶ μέχρι τῶν στοιχείων [...]
>
> [...] we think *we have knowledge* of a thing when *we'll have known* its primary causes and principles, and followed it back to its elements,
>
> transl. CHARLTON [1970], slightly modified

and in this case the *definiendum* is *gignōskein*, not *epistasthai*. Thus, in the *Posterior Analytics* we have *epistasthai* and *ginōskein*, in the *Physics* we have *ginōskein* in the place of *epistasthai* and *gnōrizein* in the place of *gignōskein*.

The conclusion I am inclined to draw is frankly pessimistic, namely that what we have here is not what Barnes and many others before and after him call an «explicit definition», but rather that Aristotle is simply telling us that scientific knowledge, whatever it might be, is knowledge of causes. Full stop. And this is something that Aristotle takes over already starting with Plato's

---

23 BARNES (1993), p. 82.

24 Actually, whereas Burnyeat thinks that «*epistasthai*» *means* «understand», Barnes disagrees: he thinks that «*epistasthai*» *means* «know», but he translated it by «understand» because he wanted an English word specifically dedicated to it.

Gorgias.[25] I go so far as to suggest that we do not have an Aristotelian definition of knowledge. Rather we have an interpretation of knowledge as knowledge of causes. In any case, if **T4** were an explicit definition, as Barnes says, it would be circular, because to some extent the *definiendum* is contained in the *definiens*, just as the third definition of the *Theaetetus* turned out to be circular at the third attempt to explicate what «*meta logou*» is, where «*meta logou*» became knowledge of the *differentia*, and so circular in the definition of knowledge.

Another option, also due to Barnes,[26] is that the passage of *APo.* I 2 recalls in some way the very famous account in the *Meno* of the difference between *epistēmē* and *orthē doxa*:

T6 Plat., *Men.* 97e6–98b5

καὶ γὰρ αἱ δόξαι αἱ ἀληθεῖς, ὅσον μὲν ἂν χρόνον παραμένωσιν, καλὸν τὸ χρῆμα καὶ πάντ' ἀγαθὰ ἐργάζονται· πολὺν δὲ χρόνον οὐκ ἐθέλουσι παραμένειν, ἀλλὰ δραπετεύουσιν ἐκ τῆς ψυχῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ὥστε οὐ πολλοῦ ἄξιαί εἰσιν, ἕως ἄν τις αὐτὰς δήσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῷ. τοῦτο δ' ἐστίν, ὦ Μένων ἑταῖρε, ἀνάμνησις, ὡς ἐν τοῖς πρόσθεν ἡμῖν ὡμολόγηται. ἐπειδὰν δὲ δεθῶσιν, πρῶτον μὲν ἐπιστῆμαι γίγνονται, ἔπειτα μόνιμοι· καὶ διὰ ταῦτα δὴ τιμιώτερον ἐπιστήμη ὀρθῆς δόξης ἐστίν, καὶ διαφέρει δεσμῷ ἐπιστήμη ὀρθῆς δόξης. […] Καὶ μὴν καὶ ἐγὼ ὡς οὐκ εἰδὼς λέγω, ἀλλὰ εἰκάζων· ὅτι δέ **ἐστίν τι ἀλλοῖον ὀρθὴ δόξα καὶ ἐπιστήμη**, οὐ πάνυ μοι δοκῶ τοῦτο εἰκάζειν, ἀλλ' εἴπερ τι ἄλλο φαίην ἂν εἰδέναι – ὀλίγα δ' ἂν φαίην – ἓν δ' οὖν καὶ τοῦτο ἐκείνων θείην ἂν ὧν οἶδα.

For true opinions are also a thing of beauty, as long they stay with one, and all their consequences are good. But they're not prepared to stay with one for long. Instead they run away from the person's soul. As a result, they

25 Plat., *Gorg.* 465a5.

26 Cf. Barnes (1993), p. 90: «The thesis derives from Plato's celebrated suggestion that true opinion becomes knowledge if it is "tied down by calculation of an explanation"». But now Barnes points out to me that the reference to the *Meno* «wasn't meant […] to offer "another option" but rather to give the origin of the strange view that if you know something you grasp its cause». He still thinks that «the *Meno* is more important than the *Theaetetus* as the background to Aristotle – and also to the Stoics; and that the importance lies not so much in the reference to causes as in the underlying thought that knowledge, unlike belief, is something *stable*. Causes come into the picture insofar as the *Meno* proposes that if you grasp the reason why *P*, then you are unlikely to forget that *P* or change your mind. Aristotle's two conditions (necessity and causes) are (or so I now incline to think) an attempt to secure *stability* both from the side of *x* (grasping the cause, he won't give up his hold on the fact that *P*) and also on the side of *P* (being necessary, it won't ever cease to be the case)».

> are not worth very much until someone ties them down by reasoning out the cause. And this, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we have earlier agreed. When they've been tied down, they become, first of all, instances of knowledge, and, secondly, settled. And this is why knowledge is something more valuable than correct opinion. And it is because of binding that knowledge differs from correct opinion. […] And yet I myself am speaking not as one who knows, but as one who is guessing. What I *don't* think is pure guesswork is that **correct opinion and knowledge are different**. If there's anything else that I would claim to know – and there are precious few things of which I would claim that – this is one thing that I would add to the list of those that I know.
>
> transl. LONG/SEDLEY [2011], pp. 176–77, modified

This is obviously the passage in which Socrates asserts that we have knowledge (*epistēmē*) only when true opinions have been «tied down» and have lost their standing as statues of Dædalus, and what ties them is provided by *anamnēsis*. The problem, as has been noticed, is that, immediately after this, Socrates adds: «And yet I myself am speaking not as one who knows (ὡς οὐκ εἰδώς), but as one who is guessing (ἀλλὰ εἰκάζων)». That is to say, the definition that he has provided by way of the image of tying and of the reference to *anamnesis* is not given by someone who *knows* what knowledge is, and is not given in the explicit form of an *anamnēsis* but only by way of an image. The only thing that Socrates claims to know in this context, which is not «pure guesswork», is the difference (ἐστίν τι ἀλλοῖον) between true or right opinion and knowledge: «[i]f there's anything else that I would claim to know (εἰδέναι) – and there are precious few things of which I would claim that – this is one thing that I would add to the list of those that I know». I am led honestly to think that, also in this case, we do not have an explicit definition of knowledge, but a mere conjecture or pure guesswork, εἰκάζειν in Greek.

What have we gained? Whatever it amounts to precisely, the Aristotelian innovation has provided one important result in my view, because the common genus of *hypolēpsis* means that we shall no longer define knowledge in terms of opinion, but rather opinion in terms of knowledge. We shall say with Aristotle that *x* opines that *p* if and only if *x* believes that *p* (i.e. holds '*p*' to be true) and *x* does not know that *p*.[27] Even if the opinion is true, this does not imply that, if I opine that *p*, this is anything over and above simply holding '*p*' to be true. Opining that *p* is holding '*p*' to be true *in ignorance* of whether or not *p*, *without knowing* that *p*. Thus, the direction is reversed: no longer from

27 Cf. BARNES (1993), p. 202 (= BARNES [1975], p. 192).

knowledge to opinion, but from opinion to knowledge (opinion is a holding something to be true without knowing that it is true).

There remains a third possibility: since Aristotle clearly distinguishes between holding to be true and opining, why did he not suggest a definition of knowledge in terms of holding to be true, in terms, that is, of *hypolēpsis*? Why did he not give the specific difference to individuate *epistēmē* from *doxa* within the proximate genus of *hypolēpsis*? Definitions of *doxa* and *epistēmē* in terms of *hypolēpsis* can, after all, be found in the Pseudo-Platonic *Definitions*, which in all likelihood date to the fourth century BCE;[28] for instance:

T7 [Pl.] *Def.* 414b10–c3

> Ἐπιστήμη **ὑπόληψις** ψυχῆς ἀμετάπτωτος[29] ὑπὸ λόγου […]. Δόξα **ὑπόληψις** μεταπειστὸς[30] ὑπὸ λόγου […].
>
> Knowledge: **belief** of the soul which cannot be shaken by reasoning […]. Opinion: *belief* that can be persuaded otherwise by reasoning […].

This «which cannot be shaken by reasoning (ἀμετάπτωτος ὑπὸ λόγου)» harks back to Plato's *Timaeus* (29b7), and the same image of the *ametaptōtos* recurs in Aristotle's *Topics* (VI 2, 139^b32–33), where it is held to be a mere metaphor and so confused and not clear. Yet here we have a definition of *epistēmē* in terms of *hypolēpsis*, except that it is a definition that gives up the principle that knowing is truth-entailing (to know is to know the truth)[31] and relies on distinguishing *epistēmē* from opinion by virtue of the fact that a *hypolēpsis* that is *epistēmē* cannot be falsified, that is, it cannot be shaken or thrown down by reasoning.[32] Analogously, *doxa* will be a *hypolēpsis* that can be persuaded otherwise by reason (μεταπειστὸς ὑπὸ λόγου). Likewise, nothing is said about true *doxa*, but only that someone who holds it can be induced to change opinion. Vice-versa, where we have science, it is not possible to *change opinion*.

28 Cf. above, n. 14.

29 Cf. Plat., *Tim.* 29b7; Arist., *Top.* VI 2, 139^b32–35: Ἄλλος, εἰ κατὰ μεταφορὰν εἴρηκεν, οἷον εἰ τὴν ἐπιστήμην **ἀμετάπτωτον** ἢ τὴν γῆν τιθήνην ἢ τὴν σωφροσύνην συμφωνίαν· πᾶν γὰρ **ἀσαφὲς** τὸ κατὰ μεταφορὰν λεγόμενον; *SVF* II 93: ἐπιστήμη ἐστὶ κατάληψις ἀσφαλὴς καὶ **ἀμετάπτωτος** ὑπὸ λόγου. See also Them., *in APo*. 40.25 Wallies; Phlp., *in APo*. 41.16 Wallies.

30 Cf. Plat., *Tim.* 51e4: νοῦς *vs* δόξα ἀληθής.

31 Cf. Plat., *Gorg.* 454d6–7.

32 At *Top.* V 2, 130^b15–18 Aristotle mentions with disapproval the thesis that τὸ ἀμετάπειστον ὑπὸ λόγου is the ἴδιον of *epistēmē*; cf. also V 4, 133^b29–31; 134^a1–3, 34–36; V 5, 134^b1, 16–18 (ἴδιον); VI 8, 146^b1–2 (εἰ τὴν ἐπιστήμην ὡρίσατο ὑπόληψιν ἀμετάπειστον).

These definitions of *epistēmē* and *doxa* in terms of *hypolēpsis* with the contraries *ametaptōtos* and *metapeistos* enjoyed a certain favour in the Hellenistic period, and especially among the Stoics, where we find a definition of *epistēmē* as «κατάληψις ἀσφαλὴς καὶ ἀμετάπτωτος ὑπὸ λόγου».[33] *Katalēpsis* is obviously a technical term of Stoic epistemology and takes the place of Aristotle's *hypolēpsis*, but we again have «*ametaptōtos*» as what is not falsifiable and cannot be destroyed by an argument.[34] These are forms of definition rather different from the explicit definitions that we might have expected. So much for *APo.* I 33.

By way of conclusion and to honour Aristotle and his *Organon*, I would like briefly to consider a syllogism. In *APo.* II 19, 100^{b}10, we read that «all knowledge is *meta logou*» («ἐπιστήμη δ' ἅπασα μετὰ λόγου ἐστί»). What does this «*meta logou*» mean? It does not have any of the meanings reviewed in the last phase of the *Theaetetus*. Here, Aristotle is simply distinguishing between *epistēmē* and *nous*. *Epistēmē* is a completely different sort of knowledge from the cognitive capacity that is *nous*. What sort of knowledge is *epistēmē*? That which calls for a demonstrative procedure, which is to say a syllogism, while *nous*, considered as knowledge of the principles, does not require a demonstrative procedure. By way of analogy, we might say that *nous* concerns the axioms of a theory, whereas *epistēmē* concerns the theorems that may be derived deductively from the axioms by way of an underlying logic like that of the syllogism. For instance:

x knows that all quadrupeds (*tetrapoda*) are long-lived (*makrobia*),

what does it mean to have a scientific knowledge that all quadrupeds are long-lived? The example is Aristotle's own[35] and it means, in the first instance, knowing that all quadrupeds are animals without bile (μὴ ἔχειν χολήν) and, then, in the second instance, knowing that all quadrupeds are long-lived because they are animals without bile. And then, the last requirement that Aristotle sets is that we must know that *necessarily* all quadrupeds are long-lived. The underlying syllogism, the *meta logou* of *epistēmē*, is the following:

1 (1) All animals without bile are long-lived
Assumption

33 *SVF* II 93. See also Them., *in APo.* 40.25 Wallies; Phlp., *in APo.* 41.16 Wallies.

34 For *hypolēpsis* beyond Aristote, in particular among the Stoics, cf. HORN/RAPP (2002), *s.v.* **hypolêpsis**; MOSS/SCHWAB (2019), §§ 4.4.

35 Arist., *APo.* II 17, 99^{b}5–6; *PA* IV 2, 677^{a}35.

2 (2) All quadrupeds are animals without bile
Assumption
1,2 (3) Therefore, all quadrupeds are long-lived.
1, 2 Barbara

The middle term here, "animals without bile", is also the cause of the knowledge of the fact that all quadrupeds are long-lived. The middle term obviously does not appear in the conclusion of the syllogism but is the cause (τὸ αἴτιον) not only of the conclusion but also of the knowledge of the fact that all quadrupeds are long-lived.

This upshot might seem rather disappointing: at the end of the day, we do not have an explicit definition of *epistēmē* neither in Plato nor in Aristotle. We have in the Pseudo-Platonic *Definitions* accounts in terms of adjoining varieties of *hypolēpsis* or hangovers from such accounts in Stoic theory of knowledge. As regards the *Theaetetus*, some commentators both ancient, such as the Anonymous, and modern, such as F.M. Cornford, speak of an intentional failure of the dialogue due to the absence of the theory of Ideas. But it seems to me that it is indeed a failure, but not an intentional failure on Plato's part; rather it is a failure of the very attempt to analyze the concept of knowledge, in particular, as for the third definition of the *Theaetetus*, of making *epistēmē* a kind of *doxa* without clarifying the meaning of *doxa*. This holds, alas, even if for different reasons, also for Aristotle. These theories fall short and their outcome is a circular definition. And to conclude with a comparison with the moderns, it also holds for modern epistemology. I quote the equally disappointing upshot of a recent book by Jennifer Nagel on contemporary theories of knowledge:

T8 NAGEL (2014), p. 55

> After three decades of increasingly complicated and unsatisfying proposals, some philosophers began to suspect that the problem of analysing knowledge was not solvable. But why not?

In 1963, Edmund Gettier published his very short article *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*, which presented lethal counterexamples to the definition, canonical in the first half of the twentieth century, of knowledge as justified true belief,[36] to show that one can have justified true belief without having knowledge. Since then, Nagel comments, the problem, «after three decades […] was

36 A definition that Gettier in a footnote at the end of his paper traces back tentatively to the *Theaetetus* and perhaps also to the *Meno*. Against the «legend» of justified true belief as the «traditional» or «standard» definition of propositional knowledge, see now

not solvable. But why not?». Timothy Williamson gave one possible reply in his 2000 book *Knowledge and its Limits*, in which, independently of Aristotle, he adopts the change of direction that we have seen in *APo.* I 33, not to define knowledge in terms of belief, but to analyse belief as a disjunction between knowledge and opinion.[37] Like Aristotle, Williamson distinguishes between believing and opining and defines opining as believing without knowing:[38]

T9 WILLIAMSON (2000), p. 44

> An alternative proposal is to reverse the direction of analysis, and validate (21)[39] by an analysis of *believes* in terms of *knows*. The simplest suggestion is that the concept *believes* is analysable as a disjunction of *knows* with other concepts. The word "opine" will be used here as a term of art for the rest of the disjunction. On this analysis, one believes *p* if and only if one either knows *p* or opines *p*. Given that opining *p* is incompatible with knowing *p*, it follows that one opines *p* if and only if one believes *p* without knowing *p*.

In this way, Williamson suggests that the notion of knowledge is more fundamental that those of opinion or belief. His theory is simply «knowledge first»: we define opinion and belief by way of knowledge. So what are we to understand by knowledge if it is a primitive unanalysable concept?[40] The answer we find in Plato and Aristotle was that, in the full sense, to know, whatever that is,

---

ANTOGNAZZA (2015), pp. 165–172 (I owe this reference to Richard Davies), and DUTANT (2016).

37 In Aristotle, as we have seen in the *de Anima* passage, the disjunction includes also moral wisdom (φρόνησις) and the contraries of the other disjuncts. A possible objection (suggested to me by Barnes) to attributing to Aristotle a disjunctive analysis of belief is that if belief is the genus of which knowledge and opinion are two species, genera aren't defined as the disjunction of their species.

38 Actually, this is a solution that Williamson ends up discarding, substantially because of the difficulty of explaining "opinion" without resorting to the concept of belief (p. 45). Williamson prefers to say that «believing *p* is, roughly, treating *p* as if one knew» (p. 47): «Properly developed, the insight behind disjunctive theories leads to a non-conjunctive account of knowledge and a non-disjunctive account of belief» (p. 48). Thanks to Giorgio Volpe and Tim Williamson for the clarification.

39 «If S knows that A then S believes that A».

40 An anonymous referee suggests that perhaps we cannot know what knowledge is because knowing what knowledge is implies the application of the faculty to itself, and she/he correctly refers to the impasse of the Platonic *Charmides*. The suggestion is interesting and certainly deserves to be investigated.

is to know the cause. Williamson's, on the other hand, can be summed up in a single word: "evidence", even if it must be specified that, although he equates one's evidence with one's knowledge, he treats that as explaining evidence in terms of knowledge rather than *vice versa*.[41]

References

ANGIONI, L. (2019). Aristotle's Contrast between *Episteme* and *Doxa* in its Context (*Posterior Analytics* I.33). *Manuscrito*, 42, pp. 157–210.

ANTOGNAZZA, M.R. (2015). The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of Its History. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 23, pp. 161–184.

ARRIGHETTI, G. (1973²). Epicuro, *Opere*. Nuova edizione riveduta e ampliata. Einaudi. Torino.

BARNES, J. (1975). Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

BARNES, J. (1993). Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. Second Edition. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

BODÉÜS, R. (1993). Aristote, *De l'âme*. Flammarion. Paris.

BONITZ, H. (1870). *Index Aristotelicus*. Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin.

BRUNSCHWIG, J. (2007). Aristote, *Topiques*. Livres V–VIII. Les Belles Lettres. Paris.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The* Theaetetus *of Plato*. Translation by M.J. Levett. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

41 This essay has undergone far too long a gestation: it is the final version of an oral presentation in English that I offered at Oxford University in April 2009 and at Durham University in May of the same year. Unfortunately, only after writing the final English version of my essay with a view to the publication of the proceedings of the Alghero conference, have I been able to read, at the suggestion of Tim Williamson, whom I thank for this, the important article, «The Birth of Belief, by Jessica Moss and Whitney Schwab, published in January 2019, on a topic similar to the one I have dealt with, even if in a cursory way, in the first half of my essay. So I was able to benefit only in part from its results, which to a large extent, at least on the essential points, seem to me to coincide with those achieved by me independently (see now also Moss 2021).» Warm thanks are due to Richard Davies for his English translation: Richard has not only translated my Italian text, he has also improved it and made it clearer and more elegant. I am also much indebted to the audiences of my oral presentations in Oxford, Durham, and Alghero for very helpful discussions, and to Jonathan Barnes, Giorgio Volpe, and Tim Williamson for insightful written comments. Finally, I have to thank Carlotta Capuccino for "translating" my oral presentation in Alghero into a written text.

BURTT, J.O. (1962). *Hyperides. Minor Attic Orators* in two volumes, 2. Harvard University Press/William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, MA/London.

CANTO-SPERBER, M./PELLEGRIN, P. (eds.) (2002). *Le style de la pensée: Recueil de Textes en hommage à Jacques Brunschwig.* Les Belles Lettres. Paris.

CHARLTON, W. (1970). Aristotle's *Physics I, II*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

COLLI, G. (1995). Aristotele, *Organon*. Einaudi. Torino.

COOPER, J.M. (ed.) (1997). *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett. Indianapolis/Cambridge.

CRIVELLI, P. (1998). ΑΛΛΟΔΟΞΙΑ, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 80, pp. 1–29.

DETEL, W. (1993). Aristoteles, *Analytika posteriora*. Akademie Verlag. Berlin.

DUTANT, J. (2016). The Legend of the Justified True Belief Analysis. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 29, pp. 95–145.

FERMANI, A. (2016). Aristotele, *Topici*, in MIGLIORI (2016), pp. 1079 ff.

FINE, G. (2010). Aristotle's Two Worlds: Knowledge and Belief in *Posterior Analytics* I.33. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 110, pp. 323–46.

FORSTER, E.S. (1960). Aristotle, *Topica*. Loeb Classical Library. Harvard University Press/William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, MA/London.

GETTIER, E. (1963). Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?. *Analysis*, 23, pp. 121–123.

GOLDING, O./MARTIJN, M. (2012). Philoponus, *On Aristotle Posterior Analytics 1.19–34*, Bloomsbury Academic. London.

HAMLYN, D.W. (1968/1993). Aristotle's *De Anima*, Books II and III. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

HICKS, R.D. (1907). Aristotle, *De Anima*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

HORN, CH./RAPP, CH. (2002). *Wörterbuch der antiken Philosophie*. Beck. München.

HUTCHINSON, D.S. (1997). [Plato], *Definitions*, in COOPER (1997), pp. 1677 ff.

INGENKAMP, H.G. (1967). *Untersuchungen zu den pseudoplatonischen Definitionen*. Otto Harrassowitz. Wiesbaden.

KIRWAN, C. (1993). Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Books *Γ, Δ,* and *E*. Second Edition. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

LONG, A./SEDLEY, D. (2011). Plato, *Meno and Phaedo*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

MEDDA, R. (2016). Aristotele, *Analitici Secondi*, in MIGLIORI (2016), pp. 793 ff.

MIGLIORI, M. (ed.) (2016). Aristotele, *Organon*. Bompiani – Il Pensiero Occidentale. Milano.

MIGNUCCI, M. (2007). Aristotele, *Analitici secondi*. Laterza. Roma-Bari.

MOSS, J. (2021). *Plato's Epistemology: Being and Seeming*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

MOSS, J./SCHWAB, W. (2019). The Birth of Belief. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 57, pp. 1–32.

MOVIA, G. (2001). Aristotele, *L'anima*. Bompiani. Milano.

NAGEL, J. (2014). *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

PELLEGRIN, P. (2005). Aristote, *Seconds Analytiques*. Flammarion. Paris.

PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE, A.W. (1912). *The Public Orations of Demosthenes: On the Crown*. VOL. II. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

PICKARD-CAMBRIDGE, A.W. (1928). *The Works of Aristotle*. Vol. I*: Topica and De Sophisticis Elenchis*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

POLANSKY, R. (2007). Aristotle's *De anima*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

SEDLEY, D. (1998/2002). Relatività aristoteliche (Parte II). *Dianoia*, 3, pp. 11–23. (Transl. in English as 'Aristotelian Relativities', in CANTO-SPERBER/PELLEGRIN (2002), pp. 324–52).

SHIELDS, CH. (2016). Aristotle, *De Anima*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.

SOUILHÉ, J. (1930). Platon, *Œuvres Complètes*. Tome XIII–3e Partie. *Dialogues Apocryphes – Définitions*. «*Les Belles Lettres*». Paris.

SVF = Ioannes ab Arnim (ed.), *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*. 3 voll. Teubner. Lipsiae. 1903–24.

VENDLER, Z. (1972). Res Cogitans*: An Essay in Rational Psychology*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY.

WALLIES, M. (1900) (ed.). *Themistii Analyticorum Posteriorum paraphrasis*. *CAG* V 1. Reimer. Berlin.

WALLIES, M. (1909) (ed.). *Ioannis Philoponi in Aristotelis Analytica Posteriora commentaria cum Anonymo in librum II*. *CAG* XIII 3. Reimer. Berlin.

WILLIAMSON, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1969/1977). *On Certainty/Über Gewissheit*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Translated by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Blackwell. Oxford.

ZABARELLA, J. (1597/1966). *Opera Logica*. W. Risse (ed.). Olms. Hildesheim.

ZADRO, A. (1974). Aristotele, *I Topici*. Loffredo Editore. Napoli.

ZANATTA, M. (1996). *Organon di Aristotele*. Vol. II*: Analitici secondi, Topici, Confutazioni sofistiche*. UTET. Torino.

CHAPTER 15

Homoiôsis Theôi (Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b1) in Late Neoplatonism

Giovanna R. Giardina

1 Methodological Problems

Before beginning my analysis of late Neoplatonist texts addressing the issue of assimilation to god, I would like to provide some preliminary methodological suggestions. Late Neoplatonism represents the last phase of ancient thought and it grew out of a long philosophical tradition which in most investigations – including the present one on ὁμοίωσις θεῷ – must be taken into account as an antecedent with which Neoplatonism had to engage, developing views either in agreement with or critical of this tradition by incorporating, opposing or combining certain ideas. However, I cannot of course discuss the issue of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ from Plato to Plotinus only to then discuss the same issue in relation to post-Plotinian Neoplatonism. Hence, I will merely provide some necessary coordinates, by highlighting the problems which Neoplatonist philosophers tackle when discussing ὁμοίωσις θεῷ with explicit reference to the passage *Theaetetus* 176a5–b2.

As is widely known, the expression under investigation occurs in Plato's *Theaetetus* within the contrast that Plato draws between the philosopher, who is the master of his own time and opinions, and the man of the law courts, who is interested in politics and perfectly capable of dealing with all practical affairs, from the most basic – like making a bed or preparing a dish – to the most socially respected ones, such as winning over an audience at an assembly or trial.[1] While the former, the philosopher, is apparently ridiculous because of his ineptitude in all matters in which the latter is most proficient, he is actually a free man. By contrast, while the man of the law seems like an important and respectable person on the social level, he is actually a slave, insofar as he is enslaved to the people who judge him and to the material things he cannot do without. Socrates' interlocutor, the mathematician Theodorus, observes that if Socrates succeeded in convincing all men about what kind of life is suitable for them to live, there would be fewer evils among mankind. Socrates' reply

1 On this digression as a whole, see LABRIOLA (2012).

(176a5–b2) is worth quoting in full, as the Neoplatonists' analysis focuses on the particular expressions used:

> But it is impossible that evils should be done away with, Theodorus, for there must always be something opposed to the good; and they cannot have their place among the gods, but must inevitably hover about mortal nature and this earth. Therefore we ought to try to escape from here to there as quickly as we can; and to escape is assimilation to god, so far as this is possible; and assimilation to god is to become just and holy with intelligence (Ἀλλ'οὔτ' ἀπολέσθαι τὰ κακὰ δυνατόν, ὦ Θεόδωρε – ὑπεναντίον γάρ τι τῷ ἀγαθῷ ἀεὶ εἶναι ἀνάγκη – οὔτ' ἐν θεοῖς αὐτὰ ἱδρῦσθαι, τὴν δὲ θνητὴν φύσιν καὶ τόνδε τὸν τόπον περιπολεῖ ἐξ ἀνάγκης. Διὸ καὶ πειρᾶσθαι χρὴ ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε φεύγειν ὅτι τάχιστα. φυγὴ δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν· ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι).[2]
>
> *Theaetetus* 176a5–b2

Plato states that ὁμοίωσις θεῷ is a «flight from here to there» and that it consists in becoming δίκαιον καὶ ὅσιον by means of φρόνησις. Therefore, the passage in question is marked by a tension between the otherworldly realm that is the object of this flight – which also recalls the *Phaedo*'s idea of flight as the separation of the soul from the body, conceived as purification[3] – and the earthly realm indicated by the virtues mentioned. Understandably, this tension has drawn the attention of outstanding scholars, including Julia Annas and David Sedley.[4] As is widely known, the topic of assimilation to god is also to be found

2 As regards the translation of the term φρόνησις as "intelligence", I fully agree with FERRARI (2011), since – as he rightly emphasises in n. 202 on p. 364 – φρόνησις here is not «semplicemente una virtù che si affianca alla giustizia e alla pietà [...], ma rappresenta il fulcro di acquisizione di ogni virtù, perché solo il riferimento alla conoscenza consente di interiorizzare il possesso di qualsiasi virtù». Ferrari's remark on φρόνησις is perfectly consistent with David, *Proleg*. 38.26 ff., which – following the *Phaedo* – distinguishes between moderation and moderation μετὰ λόγου, where the latter consists in knowing why one is moderate, and hence between courage and courage μετὰ λόγου, and so forth.

3 Cf. *Phaedo* 64c4–8, 65c11–d2, 66e6–67b2 e 67c5.

4 ANNAS (1999); SEDLEY (1999). See also PRADEAU (2003). The literature on the *Theaetetus*' digression is vast and has grown over the last twenty years or so. GERSON (2005) believes there is no real tension between the theoretical level and the practical one in the theory of assimilation to god, whereas ARMSTRONG (2004), maintains – based on a comparative reading of the *Philebus* and *Laws* – that Plato prescribes assimilation to god not as a flight from the physical world, but rather as a commitment to improve the world. RUE (1993) and MAHONEY (2004) argue that assimilation to god is not a complete flight towards the metaphysical realm, but that it rather requires a degree of civil engagement by the philosopher in the city, where he is called to maintain public order; *contra* see LÄNNSTRÖM (2011) and

in other dialogues: in *Resp.* VI 500b8–d3, a passage which takes up again the *Theaetetus*' spatial metaphor of above and below, the philosopher's assimilation pertains to the noetic order, which at 500e3 is described as a «divine model»,[5] and the ideas – insofar as they are arranged according to a rational order – neither commit nor suffer any injustice with respect to one another (500c3–5). This seems in line with *Theaetetus* 176b8–c5, where it is said that god is supremely just and that he who becomes as just as possible, δικαιότατος, will be like him to the highest degree. According to *Theaetetus* 176c4–5, knowledge (γνῶσις) of the fact that god is a paradigm of justice amounts to wisdom and true virtue (σοφία καὶ ἀρετὴ ἀληθινή). Moreover, a little further on, in *Resp.* VI 500d5 ff., the man who knows «the order he contemplates up there (ἐκεῖ)» will necessarily be for everyone – and not just for himself – a craftsman «of sobriety and justice and all public virtue». Justice, then, appears to be twofold: on the one hand, it coincides with the rational order of noetic entities, whereby god is supremely just and the man who knows this divine order will be akin to god, which is to say as just as possible; on the other hand, knowledge of the noetic order is the principle governing virtuous ethical action, and hence too justice in the civil and political sense – significantly, the latter is associated with sobriety here, whereas it had previously been associated with knowledge. In *Resp.* X 613a7–b1 ὁμοίωσις θεῷ is linked to virtue, because we read that «by the gods assuredly that man will never be neglected who is willing and eager to be righteous, and by the practice of virtue to be likened unto god so far as that is possible for man». In *Tim.* 90b1–d7 Plato then takes up again the contrast between a type of man who cares about mortal things, thereby making himself mortal (in agreement with what we read in *Theaetetus* 177a6–7), and the man who, on the contrary, worries about attaining the truth and, having immortal and divine thoughts, is remarkably happy «in so far as it is possible for human nature to partake of immortality»[6] (*Tim.* 90c2–3). Such a man restores to his thoughts that circularity which moves the universe and which he had lost at the time of his birth, when it underwent a deviation. This restoration, achieved by learning about the harmonies and circular movements of the universe, makes the contemplating man similar (ἐξομοιῶσαι) to what

BALANSARD (2015). Still useful, if a little outdated, is RUTENBER (1946). The topic of assimilation to god before Plato has been studied by ROLOFF (1970).

5 VEGETTI (2007), p. 796, n. 55, argues that the kind of assimilation discussed by Plato in this passage «non implica alcun diretto riferimento "teologico"», as the god whom, according to Plato, we should become like is the noetic order itself: «l'ordine normativo delle idee e del "buono"». On Plato's notion of the divine in relation to the forms, see also ROWE (1993), p. 192.

6 Cf. Plat., *Phaedr.* 256c–e.

he contemplates: a similarity which – Plato adds – is the τέλος of life.[7] In *Leg.* 716c1–717a, the virtuous man grows increasingly close to the gods and hence leads a happy life; only the pious, the ὅσιοι, can win the gods' favour, and to be godlike is to be moderate and just.[8] As emerges even from a first reading, these Platonic passages raise many problems, starting from the issue of how we ought to conceive of the "god" to which man must assimilate himself. However, the greatest problem is no doubt whether it is possible to reconcile the contemplative and the practical life, as both aspects are present in these passages, and particularly in the one from the *Theaetetus*, not least taking account of the fact that – as is most notably suggested in the *Republic* – it would appear to be man's duty to exercise the political virtues.[9]

After Plato, the question of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ emerges in a theoretically relevant way during the re-establishment of dogmatic Platonism.[10] In particular, a passage from Stobaeus' *Anthologium* traditionally attributed to Eudorus[11] establishes a link between ὁμοίωσις θεῷ and the *telos* of human life, which in turn is identified with happiness. From this moment onwards, the connection between the two becomes a leitmotiv in the history of Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism. The passage reads as follows:

> Socrates and Plato state the same things as Pythagoras, <namely> that the <human> goal is assimilation to god. Plato, however, has defined this same thing more clearly by adding the expression "so far as it is possible", and it is possible only through intelligence, which is to say, by living in accordance with virtue (Σωκράτης, Πλάτων ταὐτὰ τῷ Πυθαγόρᾳ, τέλος

---

7 In *Leg.* 897e8 ff. both cosmic rationality and human reason are said to have a perfect and circular movement. Besides, already in the *Timaeus* Plato describes, on the one hand, the soul and body of the world and, on the other hand, the rational soul and skull of man as spheres. See Lee (1976).

8 Here the pious man is he who is godlike and happy, and who on the ethical level displays virtuous forms of behaviour: sobriety and justice. Van Riel (2013), pp. 23–24, assigns this passage moral rather than intellectual significance. Scholars have also taken into consideration other Platonic passages in addition to the ones I have quoted. For example, Sedley (1999) has sought to trace the chronological development of this theme in the Platonic dialogues, identifying the *Symposium* as its starting point. Recently, Lavecchia (2007), has extended the presence of the ὁμοίωσις θεῷ theme to several dialogues.

9 On the compatibility between the *Theaetetus'* idea of philosophy as assimilation to god and the *Republic*'s idea of philosophy as political commitment, see McPherran (2010).

10 Dillon (1977), p. 52, calls this the «turn to dogmatism».

11 On Eudorus see esp. Dillon (1977), p. 114–135; more recently, Bonazzi (2013), pp. 160–186. Bonazzi (2011) voices strong doubts as to the attribution of this Stobaeus passage to Eudorus.

ὁμοίωσιν θεῷ. Σαφέστερον δ' αὐτὸ διήρθρωσε Πλάτων προσθεὶς τὸ 'κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν', φρονήσει δ' ἐστὶ μόνως δυνατόν, τοῦτο δ' ἦν τὸ κατ' ἀρετὴν ζῆν).[12]

STOBAEUS, *Anth.* II 7, 3f, 1–5

As we can see, this passage of the *Anthologium* is the first to discuss the question of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ by bringing Pythagoras into play, who will be mentioned by some Neoplatonists, by emphasising the expression "so far as it is possible" – which is explicitly attributed to Plato alone and taken to suggest that man assimilates himself to god through intelligence – and by stating that assimilation to god through intelligence also coincides with living virtuously.

The question of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ in Middle Platonism – which in the past scholars had only examined in a partial and cursory way – has been made the focus of a recent doctoral thesis completed by Paolo Torri under the supervision of Jan Opsomer and Mauro Bonazzi. I shall refer the reader to this thesis, entitled *Homoiôsis Theôi. A Study of the Telos in Middle Platonism* (2017), as regards both the topic in question and the reference literature. Torri discusses the Anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus*, Alcinous' *Didaskalikos*, Apuleius, Philo of Alexandria, and Plutarch, illustrating the different interpretations of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ proposed by these philosophers. I shall be referring to them myself whenever required by the Neoplatonic texts I am about to analyse.[13] In

12 We must bear in mind that the context in which this Stobaeus passage occurs is the discussion of the various meanings of *telos*, a concept which had featured prominently in the different Hellenistic schools, as clearly shown by LONG & SEDLEY (1987), vol. I, p. 398.

13 In particular, the Anonymous would appear to have explicitly associated assimilation to god not with the *telos*, but with justice, which Plato is claimed to have derived from assimilation to god (the context would appear to be an anti-Stoic one, as noted by BASTIANINI & SEDLEY (1995), p. 495). Like Eudorus, Alcinous attributes the identification between ὁμοίωσις θεῷ and the *telos* of human life to Plato; like Eudorus, he believes that Plato expresses himself ποικίλως, which to say in various ways, with reference to the fact that he puts things differently in different dialogues. According to Alcinious, ὁμοίωσις θεῷ may be identified with the knowledge of the good described in the *Republic*, and which ultimately coincides with the demiurge of the *Timaeus*. Hence, Alcinous' interpretation would appear to be a metaphysical and intellectual rather than ethical one, even though the role of civic virtues (which are inferior to the intellectual and perfect ones, but still related to them) is reaffirmed, so that the tension between theory and practice remains, see TORRI (2017) p. 138. Apuleius attributes both contemplation and providential action to the god to which man must assimilate himself, i.e. the demiurge of the *Timaeus*. In other words, with Apuleius we find an explicit affirmation, within the Middle Platonist tradition, of the fact that the *telos* is a combination of the *bios theôretikos* and *bios praktikos*. Philo maintains that what assimilates itself to god is the human intellect, and – under the influence of the *Timaeus* – he regards god as possessing both the power to create the universe and the power to order it. Philo identifies these powers with god's virtues. In Philo, moreover, we do not find the idea of a conflict between the contemplative

particular, in Middle Platonism too the topic of assimilation to god appears to be defined by the conflict between theory and practice which I have already mentioned in relation to Plato, and which endures in the case of certain Middle Platonist philosophers, while other, by contrast, succeeded in reconciling the two.

Plotinus marks a turning point in the history of the interpretation of the Platonic theory of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ. In *Ennead* I 2 [19],[14] he first of all takes up a problem already addressed by the Middle Platonists, namely the need to challenge the Stoic thesis that virtue is one and the same in man and in god.[15] In *Didaskalikos*, 28, 3,7–9, when commenting on *Theaetetus* 176b, Alcinous had already argued that the aim of human life is assimilation to the celestial (ἐπουρανίῳ) god, as opposed to the supra-celestial god (ὑπερουρανίῳ), who does not possess virtue but is superior to it. Likewise, Plotinus shows that god does not have virtue[16] and, using – like Plato before him – the spatial metaphor of "above" and "below", he argues that earthly virtues constitute the order and measure (*Enn.* I 2 [19] 2, 14–15) which man derives from participation in the intelligible realm. The civic virtues are like measures in the soul because – based on the teaching of *Phaedo* 68d5 ff. – they give measure to the corresponding vices, meaning that they represent a condition of *metriopateia*. However, in *Enn.* I 2 [19] 3, where he establishes a connection between the *Theaetetus* and the *Phaedo* (64c and 66b5), Plotinus moves beyond the level of civic virtues: he explains that there exist virtues of a superior kind which Plato has called "purifications" because they purify the soul from evils, which is to say from bodily affections. Purification prepares the soul for a genuine turning to Intellect. Once he has turned to Intellect, man is purified, assimilates himself to god, and thereby achieves justice (*Enn.* I 2 [19] 3, 10–19):

> Certainly [Plotinus clarifies by identifying *apateia* as the condition of the soul which turns to Intellect], one would not be wrong in calling assimilation to god this state of the soul, in which it has its intellectual activity

and the active life that runs through Middle Platonism, since he actually argues against leading a life devoted to only one of these two aspects: contemplation and activity must balance each other out. Finally, according to Plutarch, following god as a model in order to become like him means possessing and practising virtue.

14 Plotinus explicitly comments on the *Theaetetus* passage we are investigating. From the frequency with which the philosopher alludes to it in the *Enneads*, it is clear that Plotinus considered this to be a very important Platonic passage, as demonstrated by STERN-GILLET (2019).

15 On ὁμοίωσις θεῷ in Stoicism, see JEDAN (2013).

16 On this issue, see WOLFSON (1952). Besides, already Aristotle, *EN* X 8, 1178b10–23, had shown that there are no virtues at the divine level.

> and is free in this way from bodily affections […] (Τὴν δὴ τοιαύτην διάθεσιν τῆς ψυχῆς καθ' ἣν νοεῖ τε καὶ ἀπαθὴς οὕτως ἐστίν, εἴ τις ὁμοίωσιν λέγοι πρὸς θεόν, οὐκ ἂν ἁμαρτάνοι).[17]
>
> PLOTINUS, *Enn.* I 2 [19], 3,19–21

Plotinus, therefore, provides an answer to the question of what god man must assimilate himself to, namely the hypostasis of Intellect;[18] but he also identifies assimilation to god as a state of the soul in which it thinks and is devoid of passions. It is evident, then, that while Plotinus assigns an important role to civic virtues,[19] he considers *praxis* inferior to the theoretical life. The latter coincides with the perfecting of the higher virtues, whereby man no longer practices civic virtues, even though he possesses them, but is entirely absorbed in pure intellectual activity – *theoria* as pure contemplation – and is detached from all bodily affections. This "ethics of escape", as O'Meara has brilliantly described it,[20] resolves the conflict between *theoria* and *praxis* that endures in Middle Platonism not by reconciling the two, but rather by establishing that civic virtues are only preparatory to an aim which already the Middle Platonists had shifted into the metaphysical realm and which Plotinus interprets in an extreme way: as a condition in which the soul has completely abandoned its earthly dimension and joined god through a sort of mystical union – something Plotinus personally experienced, according to Porphyry. As Plotinus himself puts it, «our commitment […] is to be god (θεὸν εἶναι – *Enn.* I 2 [19] 6, 2–3)».[21]

At this point, we have all the background information we need to analyse the late Neoplatonist texts addressing the question of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, not without first taking a look at post-Plotinian Neoplatonism.

2 Assimilation to God in 3rd and 4th-Century Platonism

Plotinus' teaching about ὁμοίωσις θεῷ is followed almost slavishly by Porphyry. In his *Letter to Marcella* the question of assimilation to god is explicitly addressed in § 16. However, already in § 13 Porphyry draws upon Ps. Sextus'

17 On Plotinus' reception of the theme of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, see STERN-GILLET (2019).

18 Cf. Arist., *EN* X 7.

19 See esp. Plot., *Enn.* I 2 [19] 2,14–20.

20 O'MEARA (1993), p. 108.

21 At the end of *Enn.* I 2 [19] Plotinus clarifies that we must aim to assimilate ourselves not to the model of the respectable man, but to god, which entails the abandonment of civic virtues and the embracing of the mode of life of the gods.

sentences[22] – which, as is widely known, have a Pythagorean background – in order to distinguish, as in *Theaetetus* 175d–e, between two types of man: the man who the more he desires the things of the body the more he ignores god, but who enjoys fame among men, and the *sophos*, who is ignored by men but known by god. Porphyry also establishes that to say that the *sophos* is god-like is to say that his intellect is like a mirror in which god is reflected. In § 16, Porphyry clarifies that assimilation to god occurs through virtue, which leads the soul upwards. After god, the greatest thing is virtue; but god – Porphyry maintains, like Plotinus before him – is greater than virtue (μείζων ἀρετῆς θεός – 115,11).[23] Porphyry's dependence on Plotinus emerges even more clearly in the *Sentences*, and particularly in sentence 32, where the politician's virtues – namely, the four civic virtues that Plato had systematised in *Resp.* IV 430e ff. and which Plotinus too had discussed in *Enn.* I 2 [19], 1, 16–21[24] – are very different from the contemplative man's virtues and from those of the man who has already engaged in contemplation and now sees god (ἄλλαι αἱ τοῦ ἤδη τελείου θεωρητικοῦ καὶ ἤδη θεατοῦ – Porph. *Sent.* 32, 3–4). As in Plotinus, while the civic virtues constitute the first part of the journey leading to assimilation to god, insofar as they prelude to the higher virtues, which are called purifications (καθάρσεις – Porph. *Sent.* 32, 16), the latter promote contemplation by turning the soul away from worldly things, which are instead still the focus of civic virtues. «Therefore [Porphyry concludes] the disposition acquired through the political virtues consists in moderation of passion (ἐν μετριοπαθείᾳ), having for its aim to enable man to live according to nature, whereas the disposition acquired through the contemplative virtues consists in apathy (ἐν ἀπαθείᾳ), the end whereof is assimilation to god (ἧς τέλος ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὁμοίωσις – *Sent.* 32, 29–32)».[25] Note that in sentence 32 Porphyry is taking up an argument advanced by Plotinus in *Enn.* I 2 [19], 1,16–21 and which can also be found in § 13 of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*. The civic, or political, virtues and the cathartic virtues are given the same names – they are φρόνησις, σωφροσύνη, ἀνδρέια, and δικαιοσύνη – but differ from each other. The political virtues are those which

22 Respectively, *Sent.* 134 and *Sent.* 145: CHADWICK (1959).

23 On the idea that god is above virtues, see also Aristot. *EN*. VII 1, 1145a25–27, who in this context refers to a tradition (he simply states καθάπερ φασίν) according to which men become gods by a surplus of virtue, δι᾽ἀρετῆς ὑπερβολήν.

24 These are wisdom, courage, justice and temperance, which is to say the four civic virtues that later came to be described as the cardinal virtues. They are based on an ancient tradition, which certainly predates Plato, see FESTUGIÈRE (1932), pp. 17–20.

25 Like Plotinus, Porphyry posits three steps on the path to virtue: civic virtues, which are the measure of the soul and are attained by participation in the intelligible; purifications, which is to say theoretical virtues, which foster detachment from the body and prepare for assimilation; and full assimilation, whereby man sees god.

give measure to vices, to which they nonetheless remain connected; hence, they do not coincide with genuine virtue, which is always accompanied by intelligence (μετὰ φρονήσεως).[26] In *Phaedo* 69b, which Iamblichus (*Prtr*. 66, 26–29) repeats verbatim, Plato distinguishes φρόνησις from other virtues, as he does in *Theaet.* 176b1–2, where φρόνησις is presented as the virtue through which the other virtues are acquired, because it is by means of φρόνησις that one becomes just and pious. And φρόνησις, in the *Phaedo*, is not one of the four civic virtues just mentioned, but a theoretical virtue. Plotinus and Porphyry distinguish between cathartic virtues and civic virtues, and Iamblichus too fully shares the point of view adopted by Plotinus, who in *Enn*. I 2 [19], 3,5 ff. explains the flight with which Plato identifies assimilation to god in *Theaet.* 176b1–2 by implicitly referring to *Phaedo* 69c1 ff. and 82b11 ff. In *Phaedo* 69c1 ff. Plato affirms that temperance, justice and courage coincide with purification (κάθαρσις) and, assigning a separate role to φρόνησις, adds that the latter is the means for purification, καθαρμός.[27] In *Phaedo* 82b11 ff. only those who have detached themselves from the body and are perfectly pure can reach the gods.[28] It is worth emphasising that these references to the *Phaedo* fully justify the idea that the main argument in § 13 of Iamblichus' *Protrepticus*, the starting point of his enquiry, is the argument presented in *Phaedo* 64a, namely: that what the philosopher is concerned with is dying and being dead.[29] This connection with the *Phaedo*, which is not very evident in Middle Platonist texts on ὁμοίωσις θεῷ,[30] becomes evident – starting with Plotinus *Enn*. I 2 [19], 3,5 ff. – in Neoplatonism and especially – as we shall see – in late Neoplatonism.[31]

26 Likewise, David, *Proleg*. 38, 25 ff. will speak of virtue μετὰ λόγου.

27 The word καθαρμός is used for the rite of purification in Plat., *Phaedo* 69c and *Phaedr.* 244e, with reference to the mysteries; it is also the title assigned to Empedocles' *Poem*. As rites are a means by which to achieve purification, by analogy I have taken καθαρμός, which is here used with reference to φρόνησις, to indicate that the latter is precisely a means to achieve the purifications, which is to say the other virtues. On the distinction between purification and the civic virtues, see also Damascius, *In Phd*. I 147–149.

28 In Plat., *Soph*. 230d–e purification is achieved through refutation, which brings the shame required to abandon any opinions that might prevent one from attaining the truth. In such a way, man becomes pure to the highest degree, which is also the condition in which he is happy.

29 It might be useful to note that in the chapter "Becoming Like God", ANNAS (1999), pp. 72–95, connects the *locus classicus* of the *Theaetetus* precisely to *Phaedo* 64a–67e.

30 A reference to *Phaedo* 82a–b may be found in Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, 28, 2: see TORRI (2017), pp. 134–140.

31 The Neoplatonists adopt the *Phaedo*'s distinction between civic virtues, which are natural and the measure of the corresponding vices, and theoretical virtues, which are such because they are accompanied by φρόνησις. The latter virtues represent the flight that Socrates prescribes in the *Phaedo*, as they are purifications from earthly affections.

In *Protrepticus* 65, 7–13 (§ 13), Iamblichus draws upon *Phaedo* 67c5–6, where Plato argues that purification consists in the soul separating itself from the body so as to withdraw within itself as far as possible, κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, and states that this is what tradition prescribes, presumably referring to the Orphic tradition. In § 14 Iamblichus quotes – with only a few textual changes, and as though he were presenting a separate argument – the *Theaetetus*' digression on the philosopher, i.e. 173c–177a. But he does so by adding an interesting premise: that all the aspects which Plato assigns to the philosopher in the *Theaetetus*, so as to distinguish him from the politician, are merely the life rules formulated by Pythagoras and followed by the Pythagoreans, the true leaders (τῶν κορυφαίων) of philosophy[32] (72, 9–11). This is undoubtedly consistent with the Pythagorisation of Platonism carried out by Iamblichus,[33] but it is also in line with the testimony by Stobaeus, *Anth.* II 7, 3f, 1–5, who mentions Pythagoras alongside Plato and the Platonic Socrates, arguing that they all agree on the fact that the aim of human life is assimilation to god. This interpretation is all the more relevant on account of the fact that the pseudo-Pythagorean texts contain no explicit teaching about ὁμοίωσις θεῷ as the aim of human life, but rather establish an unbridgeable difference between god and man – an idea which the late Neoplatonists will take up, interpreting the *Theaetetus*' κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν in such terms. Besides, in § 3, where he quotes the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*, Iamblichus notes that Pythagoras encourages us to study mathematics, an intellectual pursuit – also referred to as virtue – which leads to contemplative philosophy, which in turn coincides with knowledge of the gods.[34] Knowledge of the gods is «perfect virtue and wisdom and happiness, and makes us godlike (*Prtr.* 11, 14–16)».[35] Contemplation coincides with the flight prescribed by Pythagoras, and with ascent to the gods by means of the daemon which they have assigned us for this purpose. The daemon in question is intelligence, as Iamblichus infers from CA 69: by guiding us as a charioteer, it preserves our godlikeness and enables us to restore our life to that revolution performed together with the gods (μετὰ θεῶν περίοδον – *Prtr.* 16, 6) which we experienced before taking human form.[36] For Iamblichus, to acquire

32 Cf. *Theaet.* 73c7 and χορευτής in *Phaedr.* 252d1.

33 The *Protrepticus*, which is the second text of the *Συναγωγή* after the *Life of Pythagoras*, presents itself right from the start as a Pythagorean exhortation to philosophy.

34 Cf. Plat., *Soph.* 230c–d. According to Theon, *Exp.* 15,11 ff., «Plato claims that purification must be accomplished starting from five disciplines: arithmetic, geometry, stereometry, music, and astronomy» (my translation, based on PETRUCCI 2012, p. 204).

35 See DEVEREUX (2017).

36 In the *Golden Verses* Iamblichus could already find a description of the path leading to assimilation to god: the escape prescribed by Pythagoras is contemplation, which we

godlikeness is to choose an immortal life over a mortal one: it is a genuine "deification" which, as in Plotinus, does not seem to allow for any deficiencies.[37] A century later, in his commentary on the *Golden Verses*, the Neoplatonist Hierocles expressed himself in much the same terms as Iamblichus.[38] In *In CA* 24, 4, 1 ff. Hierocles distinguishes, once again, between political virtues, by which man detaches himself from affections as evils, and theoretical virtues, which man exercises through intelligence and knowledge. By means of the theoretical virtues, man «escapes from here», overcoming that condition of separation from the best things which came about at birth. Hence, Hierocles quotes the *locus classicus* of the *Theaetetus* in order both to clarify that evils only exist for man and to explain the meaning of the flight that Plato prescribes in this text: the flight in question is nothing other than assimilation to god. Through an effective metaphor, Hierocles describes the flight from the gods to the mortal realm as a loss of wings and, conversely, the flight from mortal things to the gods – which coincides with the acquisition of virtue – as the gaining of wings, with an implicit reference to a *Phaedrus* passage, namely 252c3–253c5, to which I shall be returning shortly.

3 Assimilation to God in 5th and 6th-Century Platonism

The *locus classicus* of the *Theaetetus* which constitutes the object of the present investigation is never explicitly quoted or discussed by Proclus. He speaks of assimilation to god when addressing the more general question of virtues, but his reference text for this is essentially the *Timaeus*. I am not saying that the argument of *Theaet.* 176a5–b2 is nowhere to be found in Proclus – its presence is demonstrated in the secondary literature on the subject[39] – and no doubt Proclus' reflection on ὁμοίωσις θεῷ considerably influenced later Neoplatonists. However, given the explicit absence of the *Theaetetus* passage under scrutiny here, I will refer the reader to such literature and leave Proclus out of my analysis, while bearing the necessary references in mind. Likewise, no explicit interest in the *locus classicus* of the *Theaetetus* is to be found in

---

engage in by means of intelligence, our daemon (cf. Plato, *Tim.* 90b–c), i.e. the charioteer that leads us back to the circular movements we used to share with the gods prior to our fall into the body. Plato also calls this condition justice.

37 See also the quote from [Sext.] *Sent.* 376a in Porph. *Ad Marcellam* 115, 5: «Now, a man worthy of god will be a god among men».

38 KÖHLER (1974). On Hierocles, see esp. HADOT (2004) and AUJOULAT (1986).

39 See BALTZLY (2004); see also VAN DEN BERG (2003); SEDLEY (1997). *Theaet.* 176a4 ff. is quoted in *In Tim.* II 376,6 ff. and *Theaet.* 176a6 ff. in *In Ti.* II 259, 10–11.

Proclus' teacher Syrianus. One interesting element that emerges is the fact that the *Theaetetus* passage was widely debated within the context of late Alexandrian Neoplatonism, whereas it would not appear to have elicited much interest within the Athenian School, so much so that no quotes or explicit discussions of *Theaet.* 176a5–b2 are to be found even in Simplicius.[40]

An explicit reference to the *locus classicus* of the *Theaetetus* is provided by Hermias, who in his commentary on the *Phaedrus*, 101, 15–17, states that «Love is the cause of the highest goods; the highest of all goods is happiness; happiness is assimilation to god». In this passage Hermias connects ὁμοίωσις θεῷ to Plato's *Phaedrus*, a dialogue which we have overlooked so far, but which addresses the question of assimilation to god and is actually taken into consideration by both Alcinous and Philo. I am referring in particular to *Phaedr.* 252c3–253c5, where – after mentioning the fact that Love flies and makes men sprout wings – Plato explains that he who has been smitten by Love will become the follower of a god and strive to imitate him as far as possible (252d1–2). Plato goes on to explain that those who have become devoted followers (χορευτής) of a god will search for his nature, fixing his image in their beloved; and inspired by the god, they will acquire his character and habits, so far as it is possible for a man to have part in god (253a3–5). At this point, the lovers will pour what they have drawn from the god into the soul of their beloved, thereby making the latter as similar to the god as possible (253b1 and 6–7). In this *Phaedrus* passage, as we can see, the lover assimilates both himself and his beloved to a god, so the assimilation is twofold, occurs through participation, and concerns the soul. Hermias does not develop this argument from the *Phaedrus*. Rather, the most interesting aspect of Hermias' writing is the connection it establishes between assimilation to god and happiness, which is ultimately conceived as the aim of human life; and the connection between assimilation to god and the aim of human life is precisely the theoretical aspect which had become consolidated within the framework of the Middle Platonist reflection on ὁμοίωσις θεῷ.

---

40 Although he studied under Ammonius in Alexandria, Simplicius promoted a radical and orthodox Athenian version of Neoplatonism against Alexandrian Neoplatonism, which – significantly – survived Justinian's decree of AD 529, which led to the closing down of the Platonic school of Athens. On the long-standing question of the differences between Athenian and Alexandrian Neoplatonism, see esp. HADOT (1978). One example of the theoretical conflict between the two schools is the insults and criticism that Simplicius directs against John Philoponus in *In De caelo*, 42, 17; 48, 14; 66, 10; 66, 33–67, 5; 84, 11–14; 159, 2–9. On Simplicius' arguments and the structure of his polemic against Philoponus, I will refer to Hoffmann (1987a) and (1987b). A more recent study on the two school is WATTS (2006). Note that Simplicius was well-acquainted with Plato's *Theaetetus*, which was part of the curriculum of Neoplatonic schools. See e.g. Simpl., *In Phys.* 13, 10–12 and 17, 38–18, 23. The latter passage has been studied by MENN (2010).

The question no doubt becomes more complex with Ammonius, who was Hermias' son and successor at the head of the Neoplatonic School of Alexandria.[41] In his commentary on *Porphyry's Isagoge*, Ammonius sets the issue of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ within a logical framework that was to remain the context of reference for all following Neoplatonists.[42] The question which Ammonius addresses, at the very beginning of his commentary, is the definition of philosophy. In his view, five definitions are possible: two may be inferred from the subject matter – for philosophy, like all other sciences, focuses on a specific subject matter –, while two can be inferred from its end – for, like all other sciences, philosophy is directed towards something; the last definition can be inferred from the superiority of philosophy, since, when conceived as the first or metaphysical science, philosophy comes first and is therefore superior to all other sciences.[43] To avoid having to repeatedly return to this distinction, I believe it might be useful to present right now the version provided by Elias and David,[44] who increase the number of definitions of philosophy to six, by adding the definition which can be drawn from the etymology of the word.[45] Moreover, (1) they establish a precise order for these definitions; (2) they distinguish the two definitions that can be inferred from the subject matter and the two that can be inferred from the end, on the basis of how proximate or remote the subject matter or end is with respect to the thing that is being discussed;[46] finally, (3) they attribute the original formulation of each definition to a specific philosopher.[47] So the first definition, attributed to Pythagoras,

41 See BLANK (2017).

42 On the relationship between Ammonius and his pupils, see BLANK (2010), MUELLER-JOURDAN (2014).

43 See SCHNEIDER (2013).

44 These are two philosophers from Olympiodorus' schools: see WESTERINK (1990), see also WILDBERG (2016) and (2018).

45 On the relation between the two texts I am here examining, see WILDBERG (1990).

46 The subject matter or end proximate to the thing under discussion are the entities considered in their generality, whereas the subject matter or end remote from the thing under discussion are the entities considered in their specificity. One example is provided by David, *Prolegomena Philosophiae* 21, 29 ff., who offers a *gymnasia* on the topic by taking ship-building as an example. This craft has a twofold subject matter and end. The proximate subject matter is simple wood; the remote subject matter is specific pieces of wood, such as those used for the keel or steering oar, as the shipbuilder first takes wood *sic et simpliciter* and then chooses which pieces must be used for the keel and which for the steering oar. Likewise, the proximate end is to make a ship *sic et simpliciter*, while the remote end is to build a specific ship, for example a "gazelle" or a "lamp".

47 David has received more attention from scholars than Elias. The Armenian version of his *Prolegomena* have been translated and commented on by KENDALL & THOMPSON (1983) and, more recently, by CONTIN (2014). See also CALZOLARI & BARNES (2009).

can be derived from the proximate subject matter, namely entities *sic et simpliciter* (David, *Proleg.* 22, 4–5), and states that philosophy «is knowledge of real beings *qua* real beings» (Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 8, 8 and David, *Proleg.* 20, 27);[48] the second definition, also attributed to Pythagoras, can be inferred from the remote subject matter, namely specific entities (David, *Proleg*. 22, 5), and states that philosophy is «knowledge of divine and human things» (Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 8, 9 and David, *Proleg.* 20, 28); the third definition, attributed to Plato, can be inferred from the proximate end, namely «to pursue death (τὸ μελετᾶν τὸν θάνατον), i.e. to bring about the mortification of the affections» (David, *Proleg*. 22, 7), which is to say the purification of the soul (Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 9, 2);[49] the fourth definition, also attributed to Plato, can be inferred from the remote end, which is attained through catharsis as an exercise in death, and it is the definition according to which philosophy is «assimilation to god so far as it is possible for a man» (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν ἀνθρώπῳ – Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 8, 10–11 and David, *Proleg.* 20,29);[50] the fifth definition, attributed to Aristotle (*Metaph.* A 2, 982a), can be inferred from the superiority (ἐκ τῆς ὑπεροχῆς) of philosophy over the other crafts or sciences, and states that philosophy is «the craft of crafts and science of sciences» (Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 8, 11–12 and David, *Proleg*. 20, 30); finally, the sixth definition, attributed to Pythagoras,[51] can be inferred from the etymology and states that philosophy is «love of wisdom» (Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 8, 12–13 and David, *Proleg*. 20, 30–31).

Both Ammonius and Elias and David, after this subdivision and attribution of the various definitions of philosophy, try to explain them. Obviously, I only wish to focus here on the definition of philosophy as ὁμοίωσις θεῷ. Ammonius, *In Porph. Isag*. 3, 9–10, explains it as follows: god engages in two kinds of activity (ὁ γὰρ θεὸς διττὰς ἔχει τὰς ἐνεργείας), one cognitive and the other providential; in order to assimilate himself to god, the philosopher must exercise both, which is to say that he must engage in both theoretical and political activities.[52] In such a way, Ammonius reconciles theory and practice, adopt-

---

48 This expression is an Aristotelian one: see e.g. *Metaph.* B 1, 1003a20–21. The attribution of the first definition and the second one to Pythagoras may be due to the Neopythagorean texts that have not reached us. On this issue, see O'MEARA (2013).

49 It states that philosophy is an «exercise in dying» (μελέτη θανάτου – Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 8, 10 and David, *Proleg*. 20, 28–29).

50 Cf. Olymp., *Proleg*. 16, 25–26 (Busse). See transl. of GERTZ (2018); cf. David, *Proleg*. 48, 20.

51 See the testimony by Diogenes Laertius I 12.

52 See David, *Proleg*. 55, 35 ff., 77, 32 and 78, 21. A similar argument can be found in Olymp., *In Phd*. 1, 2, 3–10: god has two potencies (διττὰς δυνάμεις) through which he operates (ἐνεργεῖ); likewise, the man who assimilates himself to god operates simultaneously with two potencies, which are respectively providential and cathartic (προνοητικῶς … καθαρτικῶς). Catharsis – Olympiodorus adds – is not the kind of life which can be led by someone

ing a position antithetical to that suggested by Plotinus, according to whom assimilation to god constitutes a complete flight from the world and coincides with a contemplative state completely unrelated to practical activities.[53] Moreover, Ammonius believes that Plato quite rightly added the expression «so far as it is possible for a man», because there remains an unbridgeable difference between god and man, a difference which Plotinus acknowledged but ultimately dissolved through the complete deification of man. Ammonius instead believes that while the philosopher assimilates himself to god insofar as, like the latter, he knows and makes provisions, neither the knowledge nor the providence exercised by the two is the same.

For Ammonius, *In Porph. Isag*. 3, 24, the similarity between man and god is asymmetrical[54] and imperfect, since human beings and gods are different in terms of essence as much as of perfection. Ultimately, it is the essential difference between man and god that makes the former's assimilation to the latter imperfect: for, as Ammonius explains, while it is true that perfection for man means living according to reason and intelligence (τὸ μετὰ λόγου καὶ φρονήσεως ζῆν – Amm. *In Porph. Isag*. 3, 27), human beings and gods have different essences; hence, the perfection of their respective essences is different, and man can never possess rationality as perfectly as god.

A similar argument may be found in Elias and David, who also propose a model for the philosopher who has assimilated himself to god: Lycurgus, the philosopher and lawgiver, which is to say a man who devoted himself to both the contemplative and practical life.[55] The two commentators thus agree with Ammonius, who regards the state of assimilation to god as both a

who has only detached himself from the body after death; rather, it is the kind of life led by he who is noble and restrained in his body. This theoretical position may be traced back to Proclus, *ET* 122. For John Philoponus, *In Mete*. 14, 9 ff., god exercises cognitive, demiurgic and providential activities, which coincide with our theoretical and practical activities. However, our activities are marked, respectively, by error and vice, which shows that Philoponus, just like Ammonius, regards the godlikeness of man as weakened degree of divinity.

53 We shall see how the Neoplatonists I will be discussing do not regard Plato's ethical teaching as inseparable from his metaphysics, and hence do not see any tension between the theoretical sphere and the practical one: see LLOYD (1967), pp. 293–295.

54 Note that the relation between man and god is also asymmetrical for Plotinus, according to whom man becomes similar to a divine model that is ontologically primary, as clearly explained by STERN-GILLET (2019).

55 The Pythia is reported to have said about him: «"You have come to my rich temple, Lycurgus, / And I am in doubt whether I shall declare you a god or a man, / But all the same I shall declare you a god, Lycurgus." The Pythia is in doubt not because she does not know what to call him and needs another Pythia for this, but in order to show that his human and divine nature are evenly matched, which is why she adds: "But all the same

practical and theoretical exercise, and they implicitly oppose Plotinus. The two Neoplatonists analyse the various aspects of the passage *Theaet.* 176b176a5–b2 in detail and with very similar arguments. Both set out by enunciating doubts put forward by other philosophers concerning various aspects of the passage; they then show the mistakes made by these philosophers and present the correct interpretation. So what Elias and David believe to be offering is the correct interpretation of the individual sections of *Theaet.* 176b176a5–b2. I will therefore proceed from one question to the next, following the two commentators.

The first problem is that certain people claim (λέγουσί τινες – David, *Proleg.* 34, 18) that a philosopher cannot assimilate himself to god insofar as he is a man and hence – as we have seen in Ammonius – different from god in terms of essence as well as perfection. The problem of how the relation of likeness between man and god must be conceived, insofar as they belong to different ontological levels, had already been addressed by Plotinus. The latter had distinguished the kind of likeness entailing a degree of identity, i.e. symmetrical likeness, from the likeness of one thing with something else which is ontologically primary, i.e. asymmetrical likeness.[56] To solve the same problem, David distinguishes four meanings of likeness (τὸ ὅμοιον – David, *Proleg.* 34, 30)[57] and assigns to the difference between man and god the meaning according to which an image is said to be "like" its paradigm or archetype, just as Socrates' image is like Socrates (David, *Proleg.* 35, 9–10). Now, just as Socrates' images is said to be like Socrates, even though the two are actually different, because the image has no soul whereas Socrates is animated, man is like god, even though the two have different essences (David, *Proleg.* 35, 14–18). The same question is also elucidated as follows: god has certain features (τὰ χαρακτηρίζοντα – David, *Proleg.* 35, 19;[58] Elias, *In Porph. Isag.* 16, 20) – to wit, goodness, power, and knowledge (τῷ τε ἀγαθῷ καὶ τῷ γνωστικῷ καὶ τῷ δυνατῷ – David, *Proleg.* 35, 21) – which have been identified by the poets.[59] The same features distinguish the philosopher because, as far as goodness is concerned, just as god provides for all, the philosopher provides for imperfect souls by leading them from

---

I shall declare you a god, Lycurgus" (David, *Proleg.* 16, 25–34)»: cf. Elias, *In Porph. Isag.* 6, 32–7, 2 and 24, 20, 23. This testimony is drawn from Herodotus, *Hist.* I 65, 3.

56 Plot. *Enn.* I 2 [19] 2,4–7.

57 Cf. Ps.-David and Ps.-Elias, *In Porph. Isag.* 21, 20 ff., WESTERINK (1967). See BLUMENTHAL (1981).

58 Cf. David, *Proleg.* 17, 3–10.

59 The poets have said that the gods are givers of gifts (θεοὶ δωτῆρες ἐάων), that they know everything (θεοὶ δέ τε πάντα ἴσασιν), and that they can do everything (θεοὶ δέ τε πάντα δύνανται). These are Homeric quotes from *Od.* VIII 325, X 306 and IV 379; cf. Elias, *In Porph. Isag.* 16, 23–25, David, *Proleg.* 17, 4–9; cf. also Amm., *In Porph. Isag.* 3, 12–15.

ignorance to knowledge; as far as knowledge is concerned, just as god knows all things, the philosopher professes (ἐπαγγέλλεται) to know all things; and, finally, as far as power is concerned, like god the philosopher wants everything that he is able to do.

This leads us to the subsequent question, which is again posed by some implicit interlocutors (Ἀποροῦσι δέ τινες – David, *Proleg*. 35, 31 and Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 16, 19): «why do you say that the philosopher becomes like god by goodness, knowledge and power (πῶς φατε τὸν φιλόσοφον ὁμοιοῦσθαι τῷ θεῷ τῷ τε ἀγαθῷ καὶ τῷ γνωστικῷ καὶ τῷ δυνατῷ – David, *Proleg*. 35, 31–32)», when the poets state that «not at all similar are the races of the immortal gods and of the men who walk upon the earth (– David, *Proleg*. 36, 1–2)»?[60] The two commentators note that Plato has already clarified this difference between man and god, because to the definition of philosophy as assimilation to god he has added the expression «so far as it is possible for man». So the explanation goes as follows: the three aforementioned features are different in god and in the philosopher, for whereas «goodness is consubstantial with god and his substance (David, *Proleg*. 36, 8–9)», so that god is incapable of doing evil,[61] the goodness which is in the philosopher is goodness by participation; whereas the power in god admits of a conversion (ἀντιστρέφει – David, *Proleg*. 36, 24), because god both wants everything that lies in his power and can do whatever he wants, in the philosopher's case conversion is ruled out, because the philosopher can only want everything that lies in his power, but cannot do everything he wants; finally, as far as knowledge is concerned, whereas god knows everything simultaneously and eternally, the philosopher professes to know all things, but does not know them either simultaneously or eternally.[62] Elias pauses to note that his implicit interlocutors have raised the question of whether god is like the philosopher, since like is like to what is like. He considers this argument to be a paralogism and solves it by showing that although the three features of likeness are the same, god is participated in, whereas the philosopher participates in god's features, so that there cannot be any symmetry

60 Hom. *Il*. v, 441–442. Cf. Amm., *In Porph. Isag*. 3, 21–22; Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 17, 7–8.

61 Both Elias and David briefly discuss the thorny problem of the apparent incapacity of god – in particular, his incapacity of doing evil. However, to do evil is no capacity at all, but rather a lack of goodness, which is foreign to god insofar as goodness is the very essence of god and god lack nothing. Likewise, fire cannot cool because heat is its essence. On the contrary, man can indeed lack goodness, since he can also do evil.

62 Cf. Plat., *Soph*. 233a on man's capacity to have complete knowledge of everything. In *Leg*. x 901d–e the gods alone are said to be omniscient.

in the likeness between man and god.[63] Like Ammonius before them, then, Elias and David regard the relation of likeness between man and god as being asymmetrical and imperfect: asymmetrical because of the relation of participation, and imperfect because of the difference in the degree of perfection of the essence.

In David's text, just after the distinction between the three features of god and man, we instead find the third question: «where has Plato defined philosophy as "assimilation to god so far as this is possible for man"?». David answers by quoting the passage *Theaet.* 176a5–b2 in full. This leads him to the fourth problem, the idea that what Plato is defining in this passage is not philosophy but the flight from evils. David responds that philosophy is precisely a flight from evils,[64] as shown by the following reasoning: philosophy is an exercise in dying, which is to say a mortification of the affections; but a mortification of the affections[65] is a flight from evils; hence, philosophy is a flight from evils. Here David's argument requires some elucidation, as upon a first reading it might seem as though he is identifying the exercise in dying with assimilation to god, insofar as both are definitions of philosophy as a flight. Actually, what David is doing is confirming the relation between the *locus classicus* of the *Theaetetus* and passage *Phaedo* 64a already established by Plotinus in *Enn.* I 2 [19], 3,5 ff., whereby assimilation to god constitutes the aim and perfecting of the exercise in dying. Besides, in the texts by Ammonius, Elias and David, these two definitions of philosophy are not only the ones attributed to Plato, but also the definitions inferred from the end: one is inferred from the proximate end, the other from the remote end – or, indeed, the remotest end, since there is no end more remote than assimilation to god (David, *Proleg.* 34, 15). So from this too it is quite clear that philosophy is a flight from evils in a twofold sense: as an exercise in dying – as we have already seen with Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Hierocles – it is a flight from the affections achieved through the cathartic virtues; as assimilation to god, it is a flight to a metaphysical realm which coincides with the rational soul's full recovery of its original condition.[66]

63 Elias, *In Porph. Isag.* 17, 21–23 and 33–35: «After these remarks people ask: "If like is like to what is like, god will also be like the philosopher, given that the philosopher is like god, and god will be no greater in stature than the philosopher". […] the philosopher participates in god in goodness, power, and knowledge, but equally god is participated in the same things by the philosopher, and in this respect [god] is said to be like [the philosopher]».

64 Cf. Hierocles, *In CA* 4, 5.

65 Cf. David, *Proleg.* 29, 18–20.

66 Cf. Plot. *Enn.* I 2 [19] 6, 7–8. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that David explains this very argument by stating that philosophy as a flight is the location (χωρίον) of virtues and that Plato makes this characteristic of philosophy explicit through the expression «being

At this point the two texts – Elias' and David's – converge once again, as they turn to address the same questions. Some philosophers – they note – ask why in the expression «being pious and just together with intelligence» uses two different terms, namely "just" and "pious", if piety is the highest degree of justice – so much so that they call those who are very unjust impious. This question is far from trivial, since from the Classical period onwards the two virtues were usually mentioned together, as though to signify that piety is a kind of justice, the difference being that the latter concerns relations between men, whereas piety has to do with man's relation with the gods.[67] The two commentators maintain that "justice" and "piety" are two different virtues, to which Plato has devoted two different dialogues, respectively the *Republic* and the *Euthyphro*. So while the term "just" refers to someone who performs his proper duties towards men,[68] we call "pious" someone who is concerned with sacred matters.[69] Elias adds that justice comes before piety, because a man cannot be pious unless he has become just, and those who are incapable of performing their duties towards men are also incapable of performing their duties towards the gods.[70] Therefore, we may argue that a man has assimilated himself to god when he is pious, meaning – as we have seen in *Leg*. 716c1–717a – that he behaves virtuously on the ethical level, displaying moderation and justice.

The other question concerning the expression «becoming just and pious with intelligence» is why Plato only mentions justice, when there are four virtues of the soul, namely ἀνδρία δικαιοσύνη σωφροσύνη, and φρόνησις. The question seems rather ambiguous, first of all because, of the four political virtues, φρόνησις too is mentioned in addition to justice; and, secondly, because along with justice piety is mentioned, which sets the pair of terms "just and pious"

pious and just together with intelligence» – here David distinguishes piety and justice as virtues related to *ethos*, and intelligence as the perfecting of reason. By saying «just and pious», Plato would be defining the practical side of philosophy; by saying «with intelligence», he would be defining its theoretical side.

67 Justice and piety are mentioned together, for instance, in Plato, *Grg*. 523a–b, but also in several passages from Euripides' tragedies. For example, in *Helen*. 1638, the prophetess Theonoe states that she will betray her brother Theoclymenus by not revealing to him that Menelaus has arrived with the aim of kidnapping Helen; but this betrayal serves a noble end, namely to prevent Theoclymenus from behaving impiously towards the gods, thereby ensuring that he will remain a just man.

68 Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 18, 12: δίκαιον μὲν γάρ ἐστι τὸ πρὸς ἀνθρώπους τὰ καθήκοντα πράττειν.

69 Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 18, 13: τὸ πρὸς τὸ θεῖον τὰ πρέποντα διαπράττεσθαι, i.e. he who pays serious attention to divine matters; David, *Proleg*. 37, 31–32: ὅσιος δὲ ὁ περὶ τὰ θεῖα ἐσπουδακώς.

70 Elias, *In Porph. Isag*. 18, 22–25: πρότερον γὰρ τὸ δίκαιον τοῦ ὁσίου· οὐδὲ γὰρ δυνατὸν εἶναί τινα ὅσιον μὴ γενόμενον δίκαιον, ὥσπερ οὐ δυνατὸν τὸν πρὸς ἀνθρώπους τὰ καθήκοντα μὴ πράττοντα πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ταῦτα ἐπιτηδεύειν. A similar interpretation of the two Platonic terms "just and pious" may be found in LARSEN (2019), p. 25.

within a framework that cannot fully be reduced to the four political virtues of the *Republic*.[71] Moreover, while the two commentators immediately note that Plato also mentions φρόνησις, the φρόνησις discussed in *Resp.* IV 430e ff. – the passage the two detractors are clearly referring to, as is evident from their mention of the four political virtues – is indeed a political virtue, and not a theoretical virtue as in the *Theaetetus*: for it means intelligence, and not wisdom, as Elias and David themselves believe. So the first answer given by the two commentators does not solve the question – besides, it completely overlooks piety. I believe that the explanation for this ambiguity characterising both the question and the answer lies in the key role which Plato assigns to justice, and which the two commentators do not explicitly note but must have been aware of. They argue that each part of the soul is ordered by its own virtue, but that it is also necessary for the harmony between the three parts of the soul to be preserved: justice, which pervades the whole soul and not only its individual parts, is precisely the virtue responsible for preserving the harmony and order of the soul; so Plato quite rightly mentioned justice alone, since it is superior to the other virtues. Indeed, in those passages where Plato speaks of assimilation to god, he often refers to justice: in addition to the *Theaetetus* expression explained by Elias and David, in *Theaet.* 176b8–c5 assimilation to god coincides with the acquisition of the highest degree of justice; in *Resp.* VI 500c3–5 it means imitating god and resembling the ideas, which, arranged as they are according to a rational order, neither commit nor suffer injustices with respect to one another (in this passage the relation between justice and order is evident); in *Resp.* X 613a7–b1 assimilation to god means striving to become just; in *Tim.* 90b1–d7 it means re-establishing the rational order of one's thoughts; and, finally, in *Leg.* 716c1–717a it means being pious, which is to say moderate and just. To sum up these Platonic suggestions, godlikeness would appear to consist in being just, but according to a meaning of justice that must be explained. On the one hand, justice is achieved by restoring perfect rationality, so far as it is possible; and this rationality is no different from that of the cosmos, which in turn is modelled upon the rationality of the ideas.[72] On the other hand, this justice which is achieved through contemplation is expressed on the level of *ethos* as a political virtue superior to all others, and which preserves their reciprocal harmony. In other words, order and harmony are – at all levels of reality – an expression of rationality, and hence of justice. To be assimilated to god, i.e. to live according to an order and harmony that man derives by participation in

71 Unless, that is, we set out from the assumption previously expressed by the anonymous τινες, namely that justice and piety are one and the same virtue.

72 This has been clearly explained by FERRARI (2019), pp. 71–75.

the divine, is to live the best possible life for a human being, a happy life; and this is the aim of human existence. The fact that man can only achieve all this to a limited extent reveals the impossibility for him to transcend his earthly nature and, according to the Neoplatonists, marks the unbridgeable difference between man and god.

Before recapitulating my enquiry and moving towards a conclusion, I need to take one last step, by examining the influence of the ὁμοίωσις θεῷ argument on Christian Neoplatonism and particularly John Philoponus.

4 Assimilation to God in the Christian Platonism of John Philoponus

In commenting on *Genesis* 1: 26, 1 ff., which is to say the passage «And God said, Let us make man in our image and in our likeness (κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν) etc.», in his *De opificio mundi* John Philoponus shows how the ὁμοίωσις θεῷ argument also found its way into Christian Neoplatonism.[73] The same *Genesis* passage had already been discussed by Philo of Alexandria by drawing upon the Platonic notion of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ: I am referring to Philo, *De op. mundi* 69, where the likeness between man and god is established at the very moment of creation and is the work of the creator god, who sets himself as a model for man. Philo is also concerned with establishing in what respect man is similar to god: not in his body, since god is immaterial, but rather in his rational soul, which is created in the likeness of Intellect, the demiurge of the universe and a model for the soul (the influence from *Timaeus* 90c is evident here).

The question becomes more complex in Philoponus. The Christian Neoplatonist enquires «Whether "in our image" and "in our likeness" are different things and what each is (Philop. *De op. mundi* 241, 3–4)». Philoponus, *De op. Mundi* 241, 6–8, establishes that they are indeed different things and explains that the expression «in our likeness» signifies both that man derives his godlikeness from the fact of choosing to live virtuously and that he establishes a relationship with god which depends on his effort to be godlike. He supports this interpretation by invoking certain precepts of the saints and the

73 The question of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ in relation to happiness as the aim of human life – a connection explicitly established by the Middle Platonists but already adumbrated by Plato himself, who in the *Timaeus* regards the likeness between he who contemplates and the object of his contemplation as the aim of life – finds a remarkable echo in many Byzantine Christian authors. In this field too much remains to be investigated, since very few studies have been published on the topic: one must mention MERKI (1952), and WILKEN (2003).

apostles: from *Luke* 6: 27ff.[74] he infers the prescription to lead a virtuous life; from *Matthew* 5: 45, 1ff.,[75] the aim of a virtuous life, namely becoming children of god. Philoponus further draws upon scriptural passages that in one way or another enjoin us to become godlike: from *Luke* 6: 36, 1 ff., «Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful»; *Matthew* 5: 48, 1, «Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect»; *1 Corinthians* 11: 1, 1, «Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ»; *1 John* 3: 2, 2 ff., «Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him». So, according to Philoponus, while the expression «in our image» means that god's act of generation has created man, what the biblical text means by the expression «in our likeness» is that a man is generated only potentially (δυνάμει μόνον), i.e. in such a way that his rational substance is potentially receptive of god, but will receive god actually «when through knowledge of the truth, a life pure to the highest degree, and care for the needy, he has assimilated himself to god (ὅτε διὰ γνώσεως ἀληθοῦς καὶ βίου καθαρότητος καὶ τῆς τῶν δεομένων αὐτοῦ προνοίας ἐξωμοιώθη τῷ θεῷ – Philop. *De op. mundi* 241, 26–242, 2)». As we can see, much as in the case of the other Neoplatonists, for Philoponus assimilation to god entails a process combining practice, theory, and catharsis. He goes on to explain that according to *Genesis*, «When god created mankind, he made them in the likeness of god» (5: 1, 1). The text further states that man has been generated «in the image» of god, whereas it omits to mention the fact that man was generated «in the likeness» of god, because more than just generation by god is required in order for there to be likeness: it is necessary for man to live by making virtuous choices. By contrast to what we read in Philo, therefore, the likeness between man and god is not established through the act of generation and *ex parte dei*; rather, what is required is the conscious exercising of practical and theoretical virtues, leading to catharsis. «Hence [Philoponus concludes, quoting the *Theaetetus* passage], I believe that the wise men of old defined philosophy as follows: philosophy means being like god, as far as this is possible for man, and this is the same as saying that man has been generated in god's likeness (φιλοσοφία ἐστὶν ὁμοίωσις θεῷ, κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν ἀνθρώπῳ· ταὐτὸν δὲ τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ γενέσθαι τὸν ἄνθρωπον – Philop., *De op. mundi* 242, 11–14)».

74 «But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you».

75 «[…] that you may be children of your Father in heaven […]».

5 Conclusions

As should be evident from what has been argued so far, there is little point in trying to draw some conclusions. Rather, it would be more reasonable to try and recapitulate the positions of the various Neoplatonist commentators, which are largely convergent yet display certain differences; and these differences are quite justified, considering that the insights provided by the Platonic passages touching upon the topic of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ are not easily reconciled. It is clear that Alexandrian Neoplatonism, which was very distant from the mysticism of Plotinus and the marked religiosity of Athenian Neoplatonism, interpreted assimilation to god as a prescription encompassing both the practical and the theoretical life. It represents the outcome of a process that leads man to exercise the various virtues at different levels: at a first level, by following his natural disposition and exercising the civic virtues; at a second level, which requires intelligence and hence knowledge, by exercising these same virtues with full theoretical awareness. The exercising of virtue is an ascent to the divine realm, but at the same time man acquires his virtues from the intelligible realm, which he has contemplated through the original condition of his soul prior to union with the body – embodiment being the earthly condition of man that prevents him from being god.[76] The exercising of virtues coincides with progressive detachment from the body and the gradual regaining of a condition of familiarity with the divine. This familiarity amounts to participation in cosmic rationality, which in turn is an expression of intelligible rationality. The soul achieves this condition of harmony through its contemplation of the intelligible – or, more accurately according to the Neoplatonists, through its turning to Intellect, which might also be called justice achieved through intelligence. This condition makes man pious, which is to say capable of dealing with holy things, dear and close to the gods – «a man who can see god», as Porphyry would put it. At the same time, however, it also affects the sphere of *ethos*, where it translates into care for those who need to pass from ignorance to knowledge.

In such a way, the Neoplatonists interpret (1) Plato's god as the hypostasis of Intellect; (2) intelligence as the theoretical virtue that leads to the knowledge of virtues, including the greatest virtue, justice; (3) justice as psychic rationality, which reflects the rationality of the intelligible realm; and (4) piety as the full achievement, albeit within an earthly and human dimension, of the greatest possible degree of proximity to god and hence of happiness. In doing so, the Neoplatonists bring together the various aspects of the theory of ὁμοίωσις

76 Cf. Plat., *Soph.* 216b7–c1, where the Eleatic Stranger is not a god but a divine man.

θεῷ strewn throughout Plato's dialogues, in the belief that, once again, they are providing the most genuine interpretation of Platonism, as taught by Plato himself.

References

ANNAS, J. (1999). *Platonic Ethics. Old and New*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca – New York.

ARMSTRONG, J.M. (2004). After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming Like God. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 26, pp. 171–183.

AUJOULAT, N. (1986). *Le Neo-platonisme Alexandrine: Hiéroclès d'Alexandrie*. Brill. Leyde.

BALANSARD, A. (2015). *"Homoiôsis theôi": des formes dans le "Théétète" de Platon?* In: LOUBET, M.; PRALON, D. (eds.). *Ποικίλοι καρποί. Études réunies en hommage à Gilles Dorival*. Presses Universitaires de Provence. Aix-en-Provence, pp. 405–420.

BALTZLY, D.C. (2004). The Virtues and "Becoming Like God": Alcinous to Proclus. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 26, pp. 297–321.

BASTIANINI, G.; SEDLEY, D. (1995), *Commentarium in Platonis Theaetetum*, Corpus dei papiri filosofici, parte III*, Commentari*. Olschki. Florence.

BLANK, D. (2010). *Ammonius Hermeiou and his School*. In: GERSON, L.P. (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 2 voll. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, vol. II, pp. 654–666.

BLANK, D. (2017). *Ammonius. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ZALTA, E.N. (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/ammonius/>.

BLUMENTHAL, H.J. (1981). Pseudo-Elias and the Isagoge Commentaries Again. *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, 124, pp. 188–192.

BONAZZI, M. (2011). Il platonismo nel secondo libro dell'*Anthologium* di Stobeo: il problema di Eudoro. In: REYDAMS-SCHILS, G.R. (ed.). *Thinking through excerpts. Studies on Stobaeus*. Brepols. Turnhout, pp. 441–456.

BONAZZI, M. (2013). Pythagoreanising Aristotle: Eudorus and the Systematisation of Platonism. In: SCHOFIELD, M. (ed.). *Aristotle, Plato and Pythagoreanism in the First Century B.C. New Directions for Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, pp. 160–186.

BUSSE, A. (1902). *Olympiodori prolegomena et in categorias commentarium*. Ed. A. Busse. Berlin.

CALZOLARI, V.; BARNES, J. (eds.) (2009). *L'œuvre de David l'Invincible et la transmission de la pensée grecque dans la tradition arménienne et syriaque*. Brill. Leiden-Boston.

CHADWICK, H. (1959). *The Sentences of Sextus*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

COHN, L. (1896). *Philonis Alexandrini opera quae supersunt*, vol. 1. De Gruyter (repr.). Berlin.

CONTIN, B. (2014). *Le definizioni e divisioni della filosofia/Davide l'invincibile*, introduzione, traduzione e note. Officina di Studi Medievali. Palermo.

COUVREUR, P. (1901). *Hermeias von Alexandrien. In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*. Paris, repr. Hildesheim, Olms (1971).

DES PLACES, É. (1982). *Porphyre. Vie de Pythagore. Lettre à Marcella*, avec un appendice d'A-Ph. Segonds. Le Belles Lettres. Paris.

DEVEREUX, D. (2017). *Virtue and Happiness in Plato*. In: BOBONICH, C. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Ethics*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, pp. 53–71.

DILLON, J. (1977). *The Middle Platonists. A Study of Platonism (80 B.C. to A.D. 220)*. Duckworth. London.

FERRARI, F. (2011). Platone. *Teeteto*. BUR. Milan.

FERRARI, F. (2019). *La via dell'immortalità*. Rosenberg & Sellier. Milan.

FESTUGIÈRE, A.J. (1932). *L'idéal religieux des Grecs et l'Évangile*. J. Gabalda et cie. Paris.

GERSON, L. (2005). *Aristotle and Other Platonists*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca – New York, pp. 243–245.

GERTZ, S. (2018). *Elias and David: Introduction to Philosophy. Olympiodorus: Introduction to Logic*. Bloomsbury. London-New York.

HADOT, I. (1978). *Le problème du néoplatonisme alexandrin. Hiéroclès et Simplicius*. Ètudes augustiniennes. Paris.

HADOT, I. (2004). *Studies on the Neoplatonist Hierocles*. American Philosophical Society. Philadelphia.

HENSE, O.; WACHSMUTH, C. (1884). *Ioannis Stobaei Anthologium*, 5 vols., vols. 1 and 2, Berlin.

HOFFMANN, PH. (1987a). Simplicius' Polemics. In: SORABJI, R. (ed.). *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca – New York, pp. 57–83.

HOFFMANN, PH. (1987b). Sur quelques aspects de la polémique de Simplicius contre Jean Philopon. In: HADOT, I. (ed). *Simplicius. Sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie*. De Gruyter. Berlin, pp. 183–221.

JEDAN, C. (2013). Metaphors of Closeness: Reflections on Homoiôsis Theôi in Ancient Philosophy and Beyond. *Numen*, 60, pp. 54–70.

KENDALL, B.; THOMPSON, R.W. (1983). *Definitions and Division of Philosophy by David the Invincible Philosopher*. Scholars Press. Chico (CA).

KÖHLER, F.G. (1974). *Hieroclis in aureum Pythagoreorum carmen commentarius*. Vieweg + Teubner Verlag. Stuttgart.

LABRIOLA, D. (2012). Plato v. Status Quo: On the Motivation for Socrates' Digression in the Theaetetus. *Apeiron*, 45, pp. 91–108.

LAMBERZ, E. (1975). *Porphyrii sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes*. Bibliotheca Teubneriana. Leipzig.

LÄNNSTRÖM, A. (2011). Socrates, the Philosopher in the Theaetetus Digression (172c–177c), and the Ideal of Homoiôsis Theôi. *Apeiron*, 44/2, pp. 111–130.

LARSEN, K. (2019). Measuring Humans Against Gods: On the Digression of Plato's Theatetus. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 101/1, pp. 1–29.

LAVECCHIA, S. (2007). *Una via che conduce al divino. La homoiosis theo nella filosofia di Platone*. Milan.

LEE, E.N. (1976). *Reason and Rotation: Circular Movement as the Model of Mind* (*Nous*) *in Later Plato*. In: WERKMEISTER, W.H. (ed.). *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*. Van Gorcum. Assen, pp. 70–102.

LLOYD, A.C. (1967). The Later Neoplatonists. In: ARMSTRONG, H. (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Late Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, pp. 272–325.

LONG, A.A.; SEDLEY, D. (1987). *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 2 vols.

LUCARINI, C.M.; MORESCHINI, C. (eds.) (2012). *Hermias Alexandrinus. In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*. Bibliotheca Teubneriana. Berlin-New York.

MAHONEY, T. (2004). Is Assimilation to God in the Theaetetus Purely Otherworldly? *Ancient Philosophy*, 24, pp. 321–328.

MAZZARELLI, E. (1985). Raccolta e interpretazione delle testimonianze e dei frammenti del medioplatonico Eudoro di Alessandria. *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica*, 77, pp. 535–555.

MCPHERRAN, M.L. (2010). Justice and Piety in the Digression of the Theaetetus. *Ancient Philosophy*, 30, pp. 73–94.

MENN, ST. (2010). Simplicius on Theaetetus (*In Physica* 17, 38–18, 23). *Phronesis*, 55, pp. 255–270.

MERKI, H. (1952). *Homoiosis Theoi: von der platonischen Angleichung an Gott zur Gottiihnlichkeit bei Gregor von Nyssa*. Paulusverl. Freiburg.

MUELLER-JOURDAN, P. (2014), *Ammonios* [*fils*] *d'Hermeias: sources, héritages, transmission et postérité*. In Méla C. *et alii* (eds.). *Alexandrie la divine*. La Baconnière. Genève, 2 vols., vol. I, pp. 388–392.

NORVIN, W. (ed.) (1913). Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Phaedonem Commentaria*. Teubner. Leipzig, 2nd ed. 1968.

O'MEARA, D.J. (1993). *Plotinus. An Introduction to the Enneads*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

O'MEARA, D.J. (2013). Pythagoreanism in Late Antique Philosophy, after Proclus. In: CORNELLI, G. *et alii* (eds.), *On Pythagoreanism*. De Gruyter. Berlin, pp. 405–420.

PETRUCCI, M. (2012). *Teone di Smirne. Expositio rerum mathematicarum ad legendum Platonem utilium*. Academia Richarz. Sankt Augustin.

PISTELLI, H. (1888). *Iamblichi protrepticus ad fidem codicis Florentini*. Teubner. Leipzig.

PRADEAU, J-F. (2003). *L'assimilation au Dieu*. In: LAURENT J., *Le dieux de Platon*. Presses universitaires de Caen. Caen, pp. 41–52.

REICHARDT, W. (1897). *Ioannis Philoponi. De Opificio Mundi libri VII*. Teubner. Leipzig.

ROLOFF, D. (1970). *Gottähnlichkeit, Vergöttlichung und Erhöhung zu seligem Leben: Untersuchungen zur Herkunft der platonischen Angleichung an Gott*. De Gruyter. Berlin.

ROMANO, F. (2006). *Giamblico. Summa Pitagorica*. 2nd ed. Bompoani. Milan.

ROSSET, M.C.; CONGOURDEAU M.-H. (2004). *Jean Philopon. La création du monde*. Migne. Paris.

ROWE, C.J. (1993). Plato. *Phaedo*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

RUE, R. (1993). The Philosopher in Flight: The Digression (172c–177c) in Plato's *Theaetetus*. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 11, pp. 71–100.

RUTENBER, C.G. (1946). *The Doctrine of the Imitation of God in Plato*. King's Crown Press. New York.

SCHNEIDER, J.-P. (2013). Les définitions de la philosophie dans l'antiquité tardive: Ammonios, «Commentaire sur l'Isagoge de Porphyre», 9, 25–16, 20 (Busse). *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, 145/1, pp. 1–38.

SCHOLTEN, C. (1997). *Iohannes Philoponus, De opificio mundi*. Herder. Freiburg i. Br., 3 vols.

SEDLEY, D. (1997), "Becoming Like God" in the Timaeus and Aristotle. In: CALVO, T.; BRISSON, L. (eds.). *Interpreting the Timaeus-Critias*. Academia Verlag. Sankt Augustin, pp. 327–39.

SEDLEY, D. (1999). *The Ideal of Godlikeness*. In: FINE, G. (ed.). *Oxford Readings in Plato: Ethics, Politics, Religion and the Soul*, vol. 2. Oxford University Press. Oxford, pp. 309–328.

STERN-GILLET, S. (2019). God-Likeness in Plato's Theaetetus and in Plotinus. Ὁμοίωσις θεῷ in Plato and in Plotinus. *Ancient Philosophy*, 39/1, pp. 89–117.

TORRI, P. (2017). *Homoiôsis Theôi. A Study of the Telos in Middle Platonism*. PhD Thesis. https://air.unimi.it/retrieve/handle/2434/497472/837139/phd_unimi_R10473.pdf.

VAN DEN BERG, R. (2003). "Becoming Like God" According to Proclus' Interpretations of the Timaeus, the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the Chaldaean Oracles. In: SHARPLES, R.W.; SHEPPARD, A.D.R. (eds.). *Ancient Approaches to Plato's Timaeus*. Institute of Classical Study (School of Advanced Studies). London, pp. 189–202.

VAN RIEL, G. (2013). *Plato's Gods*. Farnham. Ashgate.

VEGETTI, M. (2007). Platone. *La Repubblica*. BUR. Milan.

WATTS, E.J. (2006). *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*. University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles.

WESTERINK, L.G. (1967). *Pseudo-Elias* (*Pseudo-David*). *Lectures on Porphyry's Isagoge*. North Holland Publishing Company. Amsterdam.

WESTERINK, L.G. 1990. *The Alexandrian Commentators*. In: SORABJI R. (ed.). *Aristotle Transformed*. Bloomsbury. London, pp. 336–339.

WILDBERG, C. (1990). Three Neoplatonic Introductions to Philosophy: Ammonius, David, Elias. *Hermathena*, 149, pp. 33–51.

WILDBERG, C. (2016). *Elias. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E.N. ZALTA (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/elias/>.

WILDBERG, C. (2018). *David. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E.N. ZALTA (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/david/>.

WILKEN, R.L. (2003). *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, New Haven.

WOLFSON, H.E. (1952). Albinus and Plotinus on Divine Attributes. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 45/2, pp. 115–130.

CHAPTER 16

Berkeley, the *Theaetetus*, and the Platonic Theory of Ideas

Aldo Brancacci

Platonic scholars are aware of the fact that Berkeley has discussed the *Theaetetus* in one of his works, if only because Miles Burnyeat has mentioned this work at the beginning of his influential commentary to the platonic dialogue.[1] Nonetheless, there is no modern study dedicated to the analysis and to the interpretation of the *Theaetetus* offered by the Bishop of Cloyne. The current article means to fill this gap and to propose a complete reconstruction of both the references to the *Theaetetus* made by Berkeley and of their relative theoretical context. The work that we must take into consideration is the *Siris*, which, in one of its sections, features a substantial harvest of allusions to the entire tradition of ancient philosophy. The authors who happen to be most frequently quoted by Berkeley are Plotinus and the Neoplatonic tradition, Aristotle, and Plato; and many other ancient authors alongside with them as well. This extensive system of references, which often intersects themselves, causes a significant deal of hardships when coming to distinguish the singular aspects of Berkeley's thought. Moreover, even if we confined ourselves to only consider the single references to Plato, we would very soon have to observe how the aspects of the platonic doctrine in which Berkeley takes an interest are manifold and diverse. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that the focal point is reserved to the theory of ideas, which, in the present work, is to be assumed as the general reference framework that we need to adopt, in order to reach a better understanding of the platonic quotations made by Berkeley.

The doctrine of ideas appears to be reconstructed under a zealous analysis of countless passages from the Platonic dialogues. Within this research, it is possible to observe the particular attention that has been dedicated to the *Theaetetus*. Berkeley takes advantage of the gnoseological and ontological doctrines presented in this dialogue, as well as in other late dialogues of Plato, for three fundamental reasons. First of all, in order to reconstruct a properly

1 See BURNYEAT (1990), p. 1, who recalls that «Bishop Berkeley, for example, thought that in the *Theaetetus* Plato anticipated and approved the central tenets of his own theory of knowledge».

philosophical history of a series of theoretical matters which he carefully addresses. Secondly to credit some of his own convictions and thoughts, connected to several matters he faces in his last work. Third, in order to rediscover in Plato the original root of notions and concepts that have been passed down to modern philosophy.

Such a thick web of theoretical motivations for the application of the Platonic dialogues explains the privileged position that Berkeley attributes to Plato within the history of philosophy. Berkeley himself mentions such fact, in a singularly powerful and clear passage, that deserves to be quoted in its entirety as a proper introduction to this research:

> It might very well be thought serious trifling to tell my readers, that the greatest men had ever a high esteem for Plato; whose writings are touchstone of a hasty and mallow mind; whose philosophy has been the admiration of ages; which supplied patriots, magistrates, and lawgivers to the most flourishing states, as well as fathers to the church, and doctors to the schools. Albeit in these days, the depths of that old learning are rarely fathomed, and yet it were happy for these lands, if our young nobility and gentry, instead of modern maxims, would imbibe the notions of the great men of antiquity. But in these free-thinking times many an empty head is shook at Aristotle and Plato, as well as at the holy scriptures. And the writings of those celebrated ancients are by modern treated on a foot with the dry and barbarous elucubrations of the schoolmen. It may be modestly presumed, there are not many among us, even of those who are called the better ort, who have more sense, virtue, and love of their country than Cicero, who in a letter to Atticus could not forbear exclaiming, *O Socrates et Socratici viri! nunquam vobis gratiam referam*. Would to God many of our countrymen had the fame obligations to those Socratic writers! Certainly where the people are well educated, the art of piloting a state is bed learned from the writings of Plato. But among bad men, void of discipline and education, Plato, Pythagoras and Aristotle themselves, were they living, could do but little good. Plato hath drawn a very humorous and instructive picture of such a state; which I mall not transcribe for certain reasons. But whoever has a mind, may see it in page 78 of the second tome of Aldus's edition of Plato's works.
>
> *Siris*, § 332

We are here to paragraph 332 of the *Siris*, where, after an accurate dissertation of several Platonic doctrines, Berkeley pays the highest tribute to Plato. What he points out is not only his philosophical value, but his great formative service

paid to the elements of political and institutional elites as well. In this regard, the reference to the passage 488a–e of the *Republic*, regarding the renowned Platonic statements circa "the philosopher kings", is extremely meaningful. His lash against «*these free-thinking times*» is just as remarkable as the one against all the shallow individuals who disregard the philosophies of thinkers like Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotle, or who have improperly put the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle on the same level of the "barbaric" Scholasticism. The reminder provided by Berkeley clearly has strong cultural and ideological implications, but also manifests the necessity of a resurgence of the studies of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies and, as it can be observed, of the figures of Plato and Aristotle, both on the basis of their works. Thus, it is even more relevant, since Berkeley is capable of quoting both Platonic dialogues and their passages with extreme precision and extensiveness. After all, the *Siris* as a whole clearly proves how Berkeley distinguishes Plato and Aristotle, at least in principle, from the scholastic traditions that, in his days, conveyed their philosophies.

Concerning the discussion devoted to the ideas, we may see the premise to paragraph 306, where Berkeley observes how both philosophies of Plato and of Pythagoras feature a distinction among three kinds of objects. In the first place, the one that implies the form or species, ingenerate and motionless, inalterable, invisible and absolutely imperceptible to the senses, which can only be perceived by the intellect. The second species, instead, is represented by the mutable world of the sensible things, subject to generation and corruption, ever unstable, which are meant to be grasped by senses and belief. Lastly, the third species is that of the matter, which is barely detectable and – as a clear reference to the *Timaeus* – only «by a certain spurious way of thinking», since it is not the subject to intellect nor to senses. In the words of Berkeley himself:

> In the ancient philosophy of Plato and Pythagoras, we find distinguished three sorts of objects: In the first place a form or species that is neither generated nor destroyed, unchangeable, invisible, and altogether imperceptible to sense, being only understood by the intellect. A second sort there is ever fluent and changing, generating and perishing, appearing and vanishing. This is comprehended by sense and opinion. The third kind is matter which, as Plato teacheth, being neither an object of understanding nor of sense, is hardly to be made out by a certain spurious way of reasoning λογισμῷ τινι νόθῳ μόγις πιστόν. See his Timaeus.[2]
>
> *Siris*, § 306

2 BERKELEY (1747), pp. 147–148.

The source adopted by Berkeley for this tripartition as a whole, and not just for the latter species, is a fundamental page of the *Timaeus*, a dialogue to which Berkeley himself refers and whose wording has been precisely retraced here. In order to give a better idea of the faithfulness and of the first-hand reading of the platonic text, I shall quote the platonic passage punctually summarized by Berkeley:

> This being so, we have to admit that there exists, first, the class of things which are unchanging, uncreated, and undying, which neither admit anything else into themselves from elsewhere nor enter anything else themselves, and which are imperceptible by sight or any of the other senses. This class is the proper object of intellect. Then, second, there is the class of things that have the same names as the members of the first class and resemble them, but are perceptible, created, and in perpetual motion, since they come into existence in a particular place and subsequently pass away from there. This class is grasped by belief with the support of sensation. Then, third, there is space, which exists for ever and is indestructible, and which acts as the arena for everything that is subject to creation. It is grasped by a kind of bastard reasoning, without the support of sensation, and is hardly credible. In fact, when we take space into consideration we come to suffer from dreamlike illusions, and to claim that every existing thing must surely exist in some particular place and must occupy some space, and that nothing exists except what exists on earth or in the heavens.
>
> PLATO, *Tim.* 52ab (trans. WATERFIELD)

What Berkeley adds, to what is explicitly stated in the platonic text, is the identification between the platonic notion of the χώρα and the matter, identification which, moreover, is already documented in both antique and late antique philosophy, specifically in the Neoplatonic philosophy.[3] After a discussion of Aristotle's position, which articulates a tripartition of the objects parallel to the renowned tripartition of the speculative sciences, within which the notion of χωριστόν, that Berkeley intends as «separable from corporeal beings and sensible qualities», becomes the «abstract», the philosopher proceeds:

> That philosopher held that the mind of man was a tabula rasa, and that there were no innate ideas. Plato, on the contrary, held original ideas

3 The coincidence between the Aristotelian *hylē* and the Platonic *chōra* can be witnessed in the Platonic and in the doxographic tradition antecedent to Plotinus. In this latter one, such coincidence is attested in many treaties, as for example in treaty II, 4 *On the two substances*.

> in the mind, that is, notions that never were or can be in the sense, such as being, beauty, goodness, likeness, and parity. Some perhaps may think the truth to be this: That there are properly no ideas or passive objects in the mind, but what were derived from sense: but that there are also besides these her owns acts or operations; such are notions.
>
> *Siris*, § 308, p. 148

In this excerpt, the exposition of the doctrine of ideas is completely gnoseologically-oriented and, moreover, it is held by the parallelism (which differs from the assimilation) among the Platonic and Aristotelian issue and the modern issue, of which, this and other theoretical contexts, Plato and Aristotle are considered to be the originators. In such a framework, Plato is often seen as the herald of innatism, whilst Aristotle as the one of the *tabula rasa*, namely Locke's *blank slate*. This leads Berkeley, who still is a perfect connoisseur of the Platonic dialogues, to the inevitable yet provisory simplification implying the statement according to which Platonic ideas would reside «inside the mind». Vice versa, the following observation regarding the fact that ideas could never lie within the senses surely appears to be faithful to Plato, and the passage, as a whole, reveals numerous reminiscences of Platonic dialogues, eminently the *Theaetetus* and its doctrine of the κοινά. Nonetheless, in the following paragraph Berkeley takes a step beyond this initial draft and remarkably delves into the matter:

> It is a maxim of the Platonic philosophy that the soul of man was originally furnished with native inbred notions and stands in need of sensible occasions, not absolutely for producing them, but only for awakening, rousing, or exciting into act what was already pre-existent, dormant, and latent in the soul, as things are said to be laid in the memory, thought not actually perceived, until they happen to be called forth and brought into view by other objects. This notion seemed somewhat different from that of innate ideas, as understood by those moderns who have attempted to explore them. To understand and to be, are according to Parmenides the same thing. And Plato, in his seventh letter, makes no difference between νοῦς and ἐπιστήμη, mind and knowledge. Whence it follows, that mind, knowledge, and notions, cither in habit or in act, always go together.
>
> *Siris*, § 309, pp. 148–149

In the first proposition of this paragraph, Berkeley is evidently alluding to the *Meno*, which is clearly echoed in the use of the verb «to awaken», corresponding to the Platonic ἐπεγέρειν (*Men.* 86a7). Berkeley is here probably looking also at the *Phaedo*, as the stress on the «sensible occasions» for knowledge

seems to suggest. The key point, to our interests, is represented by the third proposition, where Berkeley states that the Platonic conception of ideas is «somewhat different» from the one of the moderns (who attempted to destroy them), referring, in particular, to Locke and his *Essay*.[4] This passage is of essential relevance to us, since it clarifies the philosophical meaning of Berkeley's retrieval of Plato. It is known that, for the bishop of Kloyne, Locke's ideas are merely singular perceptions; as a result there cannot be ideas (in the Lockean conception) which are non-singular, as in universal; therefore the primary qualities which are used as a scientific fundament by modern scholars end up with no objective fundament, since their realness is relative to the subject that perceives them. In this section Berkeley does not indicate the existing differences among Platonic and Lockean ideas but, by enlightening the unbreakable bond, existing between the level of thought and the level of being, as it is given for Parmenides and, just as evidently,[5] for Plato, he strikes the fundamental blow towards the comprehension of said difference. It is this unbreakable connection that confers to the platonic idea a function that is both epistemological and ontological, and that, by rooting it into the level of being, proposes it as the objective principle of knowledge and science. Further on, Berkeley engages a discussion concerning the existence of sensible things, mentioning how neither Plato nor Aristotle seem to have acknowledged it. His demonstration is carried out in a more cautious way towards Aristotle, with a careful take on a series of notorious sections of the *Metaphysics*, some of which seem to imply the acknowledgement of the distinct and absolute existence of sensible objects. But, from Aristotle's anti-Megaric argument and from his distinction between a potential existence and an actual one, Berkeley correctly concludes that «from the fact that something is, it does not follow that it needs to actually exist» (§ 312), a concept that is clearly fundamental for Berkeley himself, who denied the existence of matter.

Within this frame, Berkeley attributes to the exegesis of the *Theaetetus* – a dialogue on which he returns multiple times – a particular relevance, partly as a premise to the discussion circa the Platonic idea, partly in a further, tight, articulate connection to said discussion.

In paragraph 253 Berkeley discusses this dialogue in the context of an argument with Newton and Cudworth among the moderns and Democritus among the ancients, and, in general, with all the scholars who believe that mechanical principles can provide a clear explanation of phenomena. To them, Berkeley

4 Cf. S. Parigi in BERKELEY 2007, p. 667 n. 3.

5 In particular, we must consider the definition of knowledge and science provided in the *Republic*.

opposes his thesis according to which all phenomena are truly appearances in the mind or in the soul. The external bodies, the figures and the movements do not produce nor do they explain such appearances (that is, they do not provide them their real, final or efficient, causes), «but they just limit themselves to reconduct said appearances to some general rules» (§ 251). Indeed, in the natural world there is a certain degree of analogy, constancy and cohesiveness within the phenomena, as a groundwork of the so-called general rules:

> [...] and these are a grammar to understanding of nature, or that series of effects in the visible world, whereby we are enabled to foresee what will come to pass, in the natural course of things.
>
> *Siris*, § 252, p. 120

To support this train of thought, Berkeley takes advantage of the *Theaetetus*:

> We know a thing when we understand it: and we understand it when we can tell or interpret what it signifies. Strictly the sense knows nothing. We perceive indeed found by hearing, and characters by sight: but we are not therefore said to understand them. After the same manner the phaenomena of nature are alike visible to all: but all have not alike learned the connexion of natural things, or understand what they signify, or know how to vaticinate by them. There is no question, faith Socrates, in Theaetheto, concerning that which is agreeable to each person, but concerning what will be in time agreeable, on which all men are not equally judges. He who foreknows what will be in every kind, is the wisest. According to Socrates, you and the cook may judge of a dish on the table equally well, but while the dish is making the cook can better foretell what will ensue from this or that manner of composing it. Nor this manner of reasoning confined only to morals or politics, but extends also to natural science.
>
> *Siris*, § 253, p. 121

Berkeley has derived from the *Theaetetus* two important theoretical elements.

On the one side, the main theme of the confutation of Protagoras, based by Plato on the principle of predictability of future things. Such principle involves the acknowledgement of the superiority of expert's knowledge, therefore the certainty of his knowledge in comparison to the one of common men, and so allows to refute the absolute relativism and subjectivism proper of the theory of the *homo mensura*.

On the other side, the gnoseological analysis at the base of the theory of κοινά, namely the principle according to which sensorial organs are not the

ones «with which» we sense things, rather the ones «by means of which» we perceive all that is sensible, and the faculty by the means of which we combine our sensations and inquire the common ground to all things is the soul.[6]

Berkeley goes back to the *Theaetetus* in other sections as well, connecting its dictate with a principle that is very close to his philosophy: the exquisitely Platonic principle of unreality of sensible things, outlined in both the *Theaetetus* and the *Timaeus*.[7] Berkeley is closely following these dialogues, and more specifically the first one, when he affirms that there is no proper knowledge of sensible things:

> Sensible things and corporeal forms are perpetually producing and perishing, appearing and disappearing, never resting in one state, but always in motion and change; and therefore in effect, not one being but a succession of beings: while τὸ ὄν is understood to be somewhat of an abstract or spiritual nature, and the proper object of intellectual knowledge.
>
> *Siris*, § 304, pp. 146–147

In this context, Berkeley evokes the platonic distinction between τὸ γενόμενον and τὸ ὄν, being this latter the true object to intellectual knowledge. Arguing with the Cartesian positions and explicitly referring once more to the *Theaetetus*, to the ancient «theory of the flow», to Protagoras himself and to a thick, complex background of Greek philosophy – happily related to the issues and the trends characterizing the philosophical culture of his days – Berkeley concludes with these important considerations:

> Therefore as can be no knowledge of things flowing and instable, the opinion of Protagoras and Theaetetus, that sense was science, is absurd. And indeed nothing is more evident, than that the apparent size and shape, for instance, of things are in constant flux, ever differing as they are viewed at different distances, or with glasses more or less accurate. As for those absolute magnitudes and figures, which certain Cartesians and other moderns suppose to be in things, that must seem a vain supposition, to whoever considers, it is supported by no argument or reason, and no experiment of sense.
>
> *Siris*, § 304, p. 147

6 Cf. Plat., *Theaet.* 178a–179b; 184c–185d.

7 Cf. Plat., *Tim.* 27d.

Further on, after a detailed dissertation concerning the Platonic doctrine of ideas, Berkeley refers to the *Theaetetus* once more with respect to the issue of the unity of entities and, more specifically, the unity of man. His thesis, inferred from Plato and his scholars, is that in the human soul, prior and higher than the intellect, stands unity, that grants us our uniqueness, our direct conjunction to the Divinity and our partaking to the prime Unity (§ 345). In this scenario Berkeley recalls how, according to the Platonic philosophy, *ens* and *unum* are the same, by which follows that our minds partake in the existence in the same measure with which they partake to the unity. He even adds how, after a long and zealous observation, he persuaded himself that the person or mind has to be the only indivisible being among all the other created beings and the one who partakes the most to unity. Contrarywise, the sensible things, defined as ever in becoming, multiple and various as in the ancient «theory of the flow», are here recognized a form of unity; as a matter of fact, the ensemble of all things can be considered a unique universe in virtue of the connection, the correlation and the order among its parts detected by the human mind: in the words of the Platonic scholars, and of the philosopher himself, their unity consists of their participation to the prime One.

It is interesting to observe how the *Theaetetus* has been considered, by Berkeley, the most enlightening and explicit document circa the distinction between the flow in which sensible things are immersed in and the permanence of the intelligible entities:

> Socrates, in the Theaetetus of Plato, speaks of two parties of philosophers, the ῥέοντες and οἱ τοῦ ὅλου στασιῶται, the flowing philosophers, who held all things to be in a perpetual flux, always generating and never existing, and those other, who maintained the universe to be fixed and immoveable. The difference seems to have been this, that Heraclitus, Protagoras and Empedocles, and in general those of the former sect, considered things sensible and natural; whereas Parmenides and his party considered τὸ πᾶν not as the sensible but as the intelligible world, abstracted from all sensible things.
>
> *Siris*, § 348, p. 166

Berkeley's conclusion is that, if by things we intend sensible objects, then they need to be considered eternally in becoming; if, instead, we intend the intelligible objects, then they are to be intended as immutable and motionless: therefore, those who considered the All as fixed and permanent One «seem to have understood the whole of real things, which, in their sense, was only the intellectual world, not allowing reality of being to things not permanent»

(§ 349). However, in paragraphs 313 and following, the philosopher had gotten back to the theory of ideas in Plato, in order to clarify the *status* of ideas themselves, and there he observed:

> This seems to illustrate the manner in which Socrates, Plato and their followers conceived innate notions to be in the souls of man. It was the Platonic doctrine, that human souls or minds descended from above, and were fowed in generation, that they were stunned, stupified, and intoxicated by this descent and immersion into animal nature. And that the soul, in this ὀνείρωξις, or slumber, forgers her original notions, which are smothered and oppressed by many false tenets and prejudices of sense. Insomuch that Proclus compares the soul, in her descent invested with growing prejudices, to Glaucus diving to the bottom of the sea, and there contracting divers coats of sea-weed, coral, and sliells, which flick close to him and conceal his true shape – § 314 – Hence, according to this philosophy, the mind of man is so restless to make off that slumber, to disengage and emancipate herself from those prejudices and false opinions, that so straitly beset and cling to her, to rub off those covers that disguise her original form, and to regain her primitive state and first notions: Hence, that perpetual struggle to recover the lost region of light, that ardent third and endeavour after truth and intellectual ideas, which she would neither seek to attain, nor rejoice in, nor know when attained; exception had some praenotion or anticipation of them, and they had lain innate and dormant like habits and sciences in the mind, or things laid up, which are called out and roused by recollection or reminiscence. So that learning seems in effect reminiscence.
>
> *Siris*, §§ 313–314, pp. 151–152

Having in mind the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*, from which he derives the theme of drowsiness,[8] and the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, as for the identification of knowledge with recollection, Berkeley appropriately connects the doctrine of ideas to the doctrine of reminiscence. From these dialogues, he borrows the necessity to ascend from the sensible level, which is devoid of substantial realty, to the intelligible one. The necessity and the significance of this imperative are illustrated in paragraph 330, the one introducing that very paragraph 332, which we have quoted at the beginning of this paper, and paying a tribute to the philosophy of Plato, establishing it as the cornerstone for said ascension.

8 Cf. Plat., *Tim*. 52b7; moreover cf. *Phaedr*. 246e.

For its part, paragraph 330 synthesizes the discussion held around the Platonic philosophy, concluding it by saying that

> Therefore, in order to tame mankind, and introduce a sense of virtue, the best human means is to exercise their understanding, to give them a glympse of another world, superior to the sensible, and while they take pains to cherish and maintain the animal life, to teach them not to neglect the intellectual.
>
> *Siris*, § 330

In this passage, the ethical needs merge with the metaphysical ones and, moreover, the cohesiveness among these two theoretical lines and the theme of the unreality of sensible things, on which Berkeley has dwelled in the previous chapters, in reference to Plato, reveals itself.

After paying homage to Plato, in paragraph 332, Berkeley moves on with his exposition of Platonic philosophy, culminating with the following, essential section, in paragraph 335:

> But it must be considered, that in the Platonic system, order, virtue, law, goodness, and wisdom are not creatures of the soul of man, but innate and originally existent there in, not as an accident in a substance, but as light to enlighten, and as a guide to govern. In Plato's style, the term idea does not merely signify an inert inactive object of the understanding, but is used as synonymous with αἴτιον and ἀρχή, cause and principle. According to that philosopher, goodness, beauty, virtue and such like, are not sigments of the mind, nor mere mixed modes, nor yet abstract ideas in the modern sense, but the most real beings, intellectual and unchangeable, and therefore more real than the transient objects of sense, which wanting stability cannot be objects of sense, much less of intellectual knowledge.
>
> *Siris*, § 335, pp. 161–162

This passage clearly reveals a deep comprehension of the platonic idea. In the previous paragraph, Berkeley has discussed how notions such as knowledge, order, law, virtue, or goodness have no inherent substantiality, there is nothing «real and independent *per se*» about them (as a reference to the Platonic concept of αὐτὸ καθ'αὑτό), since they are complex ideas shaped by the intellect: thus, it could seem improper to refer them to the Divinity and one could infer that a more substantial form of being could better befit it. What follows is the capital specification, according to which platonic ideas are not to be considered

as mere cognitive products (as Antisthenes claimed in the ancient times), nor are they, as stated by Locke, combined means or, generally speaking, abstract ideas, as they have been intended by the moderns: they are rather entities featuring a structuring function towards knowledge and a substantial realness. If anything, they are given the maximum degree of substantial realness, making ideas the realest beings of all, immutable, serving as a foundation for science, and therefore the highest intellectual beings as well. Shortly before this dissertation, using an Aristotelian vocabulary, Berkeley had pointed out how order, virtue, law, goodness and knowledge within the Platonic system do not stand as products of the soul, but rather as innate ideas already existing in it – not as accidents inherent to a substance, «but as light to enlighten, and as a guide to govern» (§ 335). It seems to me that Berkeley is here using a metaphorical language of Platonic derivation to point out the proper function of ideas. It would probably be far-fetched to see here a foreshadowing of the function that, later on, is going to be recognized by Natorp to the Platonic idea when considering it the precursor of Kant's *a priori*. Nonetheless, there is a common ground to the two interpretations. In that regard, Berkeley's characterization of the idea not only as «cause» (according to the Platonic meaning) but also as ἀρχή, «principle» of knowledge, should not be understated. Moreover, as already observed in the previously quoted paragraph 309, the terms «awaken, evoke and actualize», indicating the way the idea operates with respect to knowledge, are to be considered extremely meaningful and full of potential further developments. What is for sure is that this section highlights not only the foundational, but also the orientational function, proper of the Platonic idea in regard to knowledge, since the idea, in Berkeley's words, is not «inert and inactive». Then again, in deference to the Parmenidean identification of νοεῖν and εἶναι, the idea owns the highest degree of ontological realness not in spite, but because of its orientational function: these two aspects, equally constitute the idea, and are perfectly grasped by Berkeley, expressing the absolute specificity of the Platonic vision within the history of philosophy.

The following paragraphs insist on the ontological extent of the idea. There, after recalling some of the previously suggested observations and connecting Plato to Pythagoras and the Pythagorean tradition, with the purpose of clarifying the *status*' difference existing among ideas and sensible entities, Berkeley says:

> By Parmenides, Timaeus and Plato a distinction was made, as has been observed already, between genitum and ens. The former fort is always generating or in fieri, but never exists, because it never continues the same, being in a constant change, ever perishing and producing. By entia

> they understand things remote from sense, invisible and intellectual, which never changing are still the same, and may therefore be said truly to exist: ousia, which is generally translated substance, but more properly essence, was not thought to belong to things sensible and corporeal, which have no stability; but rather to intellectual ideas, to discerned with more difficulty, and making less impression on a mind stupified and immersed in animal life, than gross objects that continually beset and sollicit our senses. (§ 337) The most refined human intellect exerted to its utmost reach, can only seize some imperfect glympses of the divine ideas, abstracted from all things corporeal, sensible, and imaginable. Therefore Pythagoras and Plato treated them in a mysterious manner, concealing rather than exposing them to vulgar eyes; so far were they from thinking, that those abstract things, although the most real, were the fittest to influence common minds, or become principles of knowledge, not to say duty and virtue, to the generality of mankind.
>
> *Siris*, § 336, pp. 161–162

This section insists on the ontological status of the idea: here Berkeley, with his usual precise and deep comprehension of the platonic conception, carefully distinguishes between that which is generated, and that which always is, visibly referring himself to the *Timaeus*, but also having in mind other dialogues, such as the *Phaedrus*, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, which he is going to more explicitly quote further on in a passage that we will not be able to discuss here, since it would lead us astray from the present research. The philological-conceptual prominence of Berkeley is inestimable: he beautifully observes how the word οὐσία, commonly translated as «substance», should be translated as «essence». In this regard, it goes without saying that Berkeley reads Plato in Greek, as it can be deduced by the repeated quotations in Greek, by the reference to the Aldine tradition, with the precision with which he mentions the single passages from the Platonic dialogues: even the conferral of «divine» as an attribute to the ideas is directly derived from Plato.

Even in this section Berkeley cares to warn how «those abstract entities», which are nonetheless «the realest ones», are, at the same time, «principles of knowledge», as in they hold a structuring and organizing function in regards to knowledge: a function that, once more, could lead us to see the contours of an antecedent to the transcendental function recognized, in another philosophical context, by Natorp to Platonic ideas. Of great significance, as well, is the section in which, taking a leap beyond the gnoseological function of ideas as principles and conferring them an ethical extent, Berkeley points out that ideas are «principles of knowledge, not to say duty and virtue, to the generality

of mankind» (§ 337). This way of considering and interpreting ideas is definitely Platonic. Berkeley proves that he has not applied a foreign interpretive grid to the Greek philosopher's doctrine in order to understand the theory of ideas, he has rather derived its comprehension by a thorough investigation of the dialogues' texts and theoretical structures: this way, ontology, gnoseology and ethics end up being interwoven together just like they happen to be in Plato.

At this point, we read the final paragraph about this clever reconnaissance on the Platonic *Ideenlehre*:

> Aristotle and his followers have made a monstrous representation of the Platonic ideas; and some of Plato's own school have said very odd things concerning them. But if that philosopher himself was not read only, but studied also with care, and made his own interpreter, I believe the prejudice that now lies against him would soon wear off or be even converted into a high esteem for those exalted notions and fine hints, that sparkle and shine throughout his writings.
>
> *Siris*, § 338, pp. 162–163

This passage is extremely relevant and, under a certain point of view, extraordinary for the time in which Berkeley writes. He has not only provided us with a faithful and closely documented interpretation of the platonic doctrine of ideas and formulated some insightful considerations of philological-conceptual nature, but he has also suggested a concise hermeneutic of the dialogues revolving around three principles: reading, attentively, studying, and properly understanding. Moreover, Berkeley is capable of criticizing Aristoteles, or even better the Aristotelian argument on Platonic ideas, notoriously expressed in *Met*. A 9 and in the parallel sections of *Met*. M 4–5. Berkeley doesn't explain why, according to him, the Aristotelian doctrine of ideas is a «heavily counterfeit version», but still, considering the punctuality and the depth of Berkeley's interpretation, not to mention how it is soundly based on the Platonic texts and on an excellent understanding of the spirit of Plato's philosophy, it is only appropriate to believe that, with that strong formula, on the one side he means to allude to the argument, forwarded by Aristotle, on both the doctrine of ideas and the doctrine of the principles (the latter belongs to Plato's oral teachings), and on the other side to the theoretical system of the Aristotelian argument as a whole. Even though it does not deplete it, Berkeley's immaterialism could never have embraced the realist assumption underlying the Aristotelian notion of οὐσία.

Vice versa, the platonic thought perfectly collides with the Berkeleyan one, since it traces back the concept of the Being to the immaterial idea and such identification aligns, in Plato, with a parallel decay of the sensible world's ontological status. While the first Platonic thesis is repeatedly celebrated by Berkeley, the second one seems to completely adhere to his own philosophy. As a matter of fact, this second thesis is the cornerstone to many other sections of the *Siris*, which we cannot afford to properly discuss in the present paper, but nonetheless, affect the very core of his philosophy. Ultimately, we have to mention how Berkeley's denial of the Aristotelian argument against the Platonic idea is perfectly cohesive with his take on the latter. The fact that the Irish philosopher states that «some of Plato's own school have said very odd things concerning them» further encourages us to believe that he must have been fully aware of the middle and Neoplatonic interpretation of ideas as thoughts residing within God's mind. Such point of view was, as a matter of fact, extremely diffused during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, to the extent that it reaches up to Kant, and it is going to decline only after the rise of the nineteenth century hermeneutic and with the development of the historical-philosophical method, which have both been fruitfully applied to the exegesis of the platonic dialogues. What is certain, and in this regard we need to keep in mind that Berkeley was a proficient Biblicist himself, is that in the *Siris* there already is a remarkable and substantial foreshadowing of this new hermeneutic.

References

BERKELEY, G. (1747). *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtue of Tar Water, And divers other Subjects connected together and arising one from another*. By The Right Rev. Dr. George Berkeley, Lord Bishop of Cloyne, and Author of *The Minute Philosopher*. A New Edition, With Additions and Emendations. W. Innys, and C. Hitch, and C. Davis. Dublin Printed and London Re-printed.

BERKELEY, G. (2007). *Opere filosofiche*, a cura di Silvia Parigi. UTET. Torino.

BURNYEAT, M. (1990). *The Theaetetus of Plato*. Translation by M.J. Levett, revised by M. Burnyeat. Hackett Publishing Company. Indianapolis-Cambridge.

WATERFIELD, R. (2008). *Plato: Timaeus and Critias*, translation by R. Waterfield; Introduction and Notes by A. Gregory. OUP. Oxford.

Index of Authors

(with the exception of 'Plato')

Modern